"Loved it! Just loved it. I'm off to find the next one."
THE ITINERANT WARBLER
HISPANIA
BOOK TWO
LETITIA COYNE
AUTHOR OF BRITANNIA

The Story --

Although the siege of Numantia in 133BC marked the end of organized resistance to Rome, the Celtiberian tribes of northern Spain maintained their heritage of warrior elites -- and their hatred of Rome.They accepted the comforts, infrastructure and the benefits of Empire, while remaining independent tribal city-states under the control of noble families.

Marella was the daughter of one such family.

Falsely accused by a vile and corrupt Druidic high priest, she is set to be executed. Her rescuer is Marcus, a Roman deserter from Britannia who has made his home in the Gallego valley above Caesaraugusta.

Finding no purpose in the life he leads, bored and frustrated, he relishes the chance to face the challenges that come with saving the life of this young noblewoman. Her best chance of survival lies in travelling across the province to Numantia, and her only chance of survival is to do that with Marc.

Somehow they must stay ahead of High Priest Leucetius and the priests of a Romanised and corrupted temple; Marella's noble brother Taran and his standing army; and the army of Rome itself.

Away from the capital, the Roman world was a complex, sometimes bloody, blend and clash of cultures. The people were not stereotypical Roman ladies and gents consumed by the politics of Caesar's court. Hispania is a glimpse into the less well known lives of Rome.

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HISPANIA

Book Two.

Letitia Coyne

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This book is available in print from most online book retailers.

Other titles by Letitia Coyne.

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CHAPTER ONE.

Hispania Tarraconensis, October, AD82.

Marella struggled against her bonds. If they meant to send her to the underworld, she would at least do her best to send his name ahead of her. "I've done nothing wrong," she screamed again, fighting to keep her legs from folding. "Leucetius has to answer for this."

Even through her desperation his name dragged up bile. It burned against the tight choke of plaited ropes where useless screams had scraped her throat raw. Terror froze her naked flesh, numbing her to all but the desperate need to breathe.

Staggering, slithering down over pebbles and shale, she fought to keep her feet. Holding herself upright against all probability, she managed to turn, managed to fix her fierce hatred onto his shadowed form. Another shove and she would not have the strength to get back up. One more punch and she might surrender to the darkness. "Vile dog," she hissed. She couldn't spit. Her mouth was as dry as a crypt.

Beside her, a novice drew a hard fist and slammed it into her stomach.

She crumbled to her knees, her mouth open over air that would not move in or out, and he kicked her into water. In the silent world of asphyxia, she almost smiled.

Her vision was a sepia cloud where the gritty sludge of the riverbank washed into her eyes and mouth, waiting.

Her body heaved and jerked over its effort to drag air into the vacuum left by his blow. When it came, her breath would pull death and water deep into her lungs and her struggle would be forfeit. The harder her body fought for life, the sooner it would end.

If only she had caught Leucetius' robe, she might have dragged him to meet death with her. But nothing mattered so much now.

Blessed was the child who would never see the sun in any world where he drew breath.

Blessed was the child.

Innocent and blessed.

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Drawing the fine strands of hair as he would have drawn fleece, Marcus rolled them through wax between his palms to form a fine cord. Even under the amber influence of the bees, the strand of her hair shone golden, catching the light and holding sunshine in its depths.

Below him on the slopes of the River Iberus, a dozen sheep grazed in peaceful oblivion, hardly needing his attention. The milk cow moved with slow precision, her jaw clacking back against the hollow brass at her neck to mark her progress. Beside her was her calf, and Marc's single store bullock stood, staring back to meet his gaze.

"You'll be meat soon enough, my friend," he said, almost to himself.

There was little enough cause to speak since his wife's death, and the animals asked him no difficult questions. Above him, the long spine of the mountain marched away from the weakening sun, shining gold through its usual coat of silver dust and sparse grey foliage. Behind him, Max, the great mountain dog, lay beside his son, drooling while it watched the child eat corn cake.

As he rolled the precious lock of her hair into a fine twisted thread, Marc smiled at the idiot expression on the dog's face. Its rough cream coat ruffled in the late autumn breezes, trembling as if the wind itself encouraged the pursuit of a biscuit.

Marc gave a short whistle that brought the dog from its trance to his knee. From the riverside, the bitch, too, came at a steady lope to sit at her master's foot. The child looked up from his snack, gathered up his carved wooden horse, and ran after the dog to his father's side.

The sky was colouring toward evening. It was time to take the stock back to the pens and the boy in for a meal.

Life went on.

"Time to take the woollies in, lad. Will you send the dogs after them?" He looked to the boy, waiting while the four-year-old considered the difficulty of his job.

Pursing his lips, he tried to whistle, pointing down at the green riverbank.

Both dogs cocked their ears at the hiss. Max tilted his great head comically, waiting for someone to translate the sound into something he could follow.

Smiling, Marc said, "And again. They want you to tell them what to do." He sent a shrill whistle out over his lip, and the child waved determinedly at the sheep. This the dogs could understand. Separating silently, they moved down along the river, pushing their flock together, moving the cow and calf and the laconic bullock into the midst of the sheep.

His hands worked against the thread all by themselves, rolling and twisting the hair and the wax, and at last he looked down at his work. So little. Nothing left of all her light and joy but a thin waxed line of thread. Carefully he measured it around his neck

and marked the place he would tie the knots, ensuring he had strained enough length from it.

"What's that Dad?" The boy put his small hand on Marc's thigh.

His eyes were dark, deeply brown and serious. His hair was dark, soft and straight. There was nothing of his mother's golden light, except when he smiled. Sometimes when the child smiled, there was a naive joy in his eyes and full cheeks that carried her memory in its glow.

"Mamma's hair." Marc wrapped the thread around his throat again, demonstrating his intention of tying it there. "I made a thread so I can keep her with me."

"Mamma's gone now, isn't she?"

"Aye, lad."

"She isn't coming home anymore is she, Dad?"

"No," he said quietly. "She can't come home to us now."

They'd had this conversation before. More often than he cared to remember. Sometimes it was harder than others. "Come on. Let's follow the dogs in."

Scooping the child up as he stood, he straightened the heavy brown wool of his kilt and reached for his crook.

The house was still too new. It had not had time to settle. None of its edges had softened into familiarity. Only the thatch was greying to match the limestone surroundings, dusted and harsh.

Rough wooden pikes formed a circle, daubed and sealed with clay and cut grass and covered by high domed thatch. Behind it, a wooden lean-to served as a barn, and rough timber rails ran away around the stock pen. To this the dogs pushed their few animals, and with the boy in his arms, Marc lifted and slipped rails across behind them.

"You can bring in the firewood, now." He set the child down. "And I'll fetch up water. Go now, take it in and pile it by the hearth."

A snapped command brought the dogs to his side. He pointed obviously at the ground, ordering the bitch to the boy's side, while he tapped his thigh and walked to the pail and away with Max beside him.

As they wound down the long rocky path, between spindly brushes, toward the Gallego River, it was the sudden catch in Max's run that first caught his eye. The dog stopped short, lifting his great head in the dimming light and twitching his ears at the unknown ahead. A soft growl rose in his chest, and Marc slipped into a reflexive crouch, stepping to the side of the track and feeling without thought for the knives at his belt.

Raised voices suggested a small group, five, maybe six men ahead at the riverside. And a woman's scream.

This language still confused his ears. Always on the brink of familiarity, but distinctly different from the Celtic tongue he knew, he repeatedly found himself waiting to understand known words, rather than listening to translate.

He slipped forward, silently ordering the dog to his side. Past the last slim shafts of the trees, he made out the forms ahead.

Druids.

Despite his Celtic heritage, he had been raised Roman enough to hate the priesthood. He had ridden with Agricola's auxiliary cavalry, one of the first to cross the Menai Straight to the Isle of Mona. He had seen more bloodshed in the Cambrian campaign against the Druids than in all his twelve long years of Roman service.

And here before him, they were about blood again.

The woman was naked, her wrists caught behind her and bound by a leather rope that twisted up around her throat. Robed, as if to conceal their guilt from their gods,

they moved as one against her pointless resistance. She turned again, alone but screaming her defiance. Hopelessly, she proclaimed her innocence.

Her trial, it seemed, was over; they had no interest in her arguments. The figure beside her smashed a fist into her soft flesh, and she crumbled down into the cold wash of the river. A final kick seemed to satisfy her attacker. He stepped back, making way for another to move in. The second man had a long pike raised, nudging her form with his foot to open her back.

In a moment he would plunge the weapon down and stake her to the riverbed.

In a moment he would be too late.

Old skills lay deep in the muscles of Marc's arm. His eye gauged the distance without a second thought, and the knife was in the air before he had considered the options before him.

By the time he stepped forward to judge the opposition he met, the blade had buried deep in the throat of her assailant and he'd dropped to his knees beside her, pained surprise gaping from his mouth.

By the time he had counted the men on the lower bank, judged them mostly unarmed and leapt from the stones at his feet into the rushing water, another blade had found the ribs of her second attacker.

Max did not need any more incentive to attack. Throwing his hundred and forty pounds into the balance, he leapt into the rushing water beside his master. As Marc fought for balance crossing the slipping rocks and cascades, the giant dog seized a priestly arm and drove his weight in against the trio standing on the bank above. His victim went down screaming as the others shook free of their surprise and turned to rush downstream into the cover of dusk.

Marc ignored the cries of the fallen man, striding into deeper water to grasp the ghostly arm of their victim. The current had moved her lifeless form, carrying her almost from his reach. When he caught her, the bindings that ran from her hands, up behind her shoulders, and around her throat pulled tighter, strangling her.

Feeling blindly in the darkening water for the hilt at his calf, he rushed another razor sharp blade against the leather of her ties.

"Max!" The dog stood back, shaking as the wolf in his blood begged to be allowed back at the throat. Gore stained the thick white of his breast and he licked at his slobbering jowls, harsh breaths hacking over his tongue.

Moving as quickly as her weight allowed, Marcus staggered back up the rocky river bed. Knowing that the Druids were fleeing did nothing to reduce the hot burn of vulnerability that sharpened in the skin between his shoulderblades. A soldier's awareness of exposure ached into his spine as he fought to a safe distance.

On the stubbly grass away from the water's edge, he stopped, taking a moment to scan the river before he turned his attention to the woman at his knees. Shaking, he rode the cresting wave of adrenaline too long suppressed as he moved his knife blade back to the plaited rope that pulled into her throat.

Her eyes were barely opened, staring after visions of an afterworld less painful than the one she left.

He was too late.

Looking down on the lustreless silver of her skin, he choked on rising fury. Futility clenched his fists against all the failures of his life. He didn't want to let her go. He had no way to bring her back.

Savage with grief and frustration, he grasped her shoulders. Lifting the frail weight of her easily, shaking her, he bellowed into her face, "Breathe!"

Her head lolled back, unaware of his anguish, and he groaned as he let her sink slowly back onto the stone. But her body resisted its abuses. Low in the soft curves of her abdomen jagged contractions forced themselves around the unseen life within. Even as he moved to squat back onto his heels, her body heaved against itself, vomiting water and gagging on air.

The first hoarse breath she drew was crushed out of her again on a cry of agony. Then a second, a third, a fourth, groaned as her blood found air and that brought with it pain.

Caught between surprise and relief, Marcus stood quickly. Stooping to force his arms under her shoulders and knees, and trusting his feet on the uneven path, he ran with her up the trail toward the sanctuary of the hut.

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The High Priest paced the floor, his hands locked behind his back.

The girl was dead, he was almost certain. Almost certain. He couldn't be sure.

All the gods should pour their malevolence over her infinite rebirth.

It was frustration that fuelled his endless tread. Fear and frustration. What he needed was a clear head, a chance to think everything through from beginning to end. What he needed was a way to turn this debacle to his advantage.

"Do you know who he is?"

The question jolted through his novice companion. "No, Sir. I've never seen or heard of him before."

It was impossible. No man could stand apart so obviously and not be known. Someone in Caesaraugusta must know of him. "I want you to comb the city. I want information from anyone who might recognize the description." He turned the heat of his ire on the youth. "You saw him. Find anyone who knows of a fair-haired man, head and shoulders taller than most, who lives in this area. He must be a farmer: a shepherd or cattleman. If nothing else, the tattoos on his arm will have been noticed."

The boy looked back, his own shock at the evening's events written clearly in the white glare of his eyes. "Tonight? Now, Sir?"

"Yes idiot, now! Go now and don't come back until you have the information I need."

The stranger had to live nearby in the foothills. On the city side of the Iberus River, the valley was wide and flat. Good farming and grazing land was owned by families of note. But on the far side, where the Gallego rushed down to a confluence, the dry slopes gave less to stock. Poorer men might take a holding there. The poorer or weaker they were, the further back they would be pushed into the lap of the great Pyrenees Mountains.

This man was not weak. Three of the novices were dead at his hand and in the work of a moment.

That was a light in his night, at least. Three men who might carry her claims abroad had been silenced. The fourth, this last idiot, had been scared from his wits. He would be silent for a time. Time enough to force some order into the mess this damnable woman had made.

Damn her. Damn her face. Damn the full curves of her flesh. Damn the pretension that flowed in her blood. Damn it all!

First, he had to keep the night's events from her brother. That was the first thing he had to ensure.

Or not.

He'd been at such pains to show she was with child to a Roman, the idea of a poor foreign farmer had never crossed his mind. If the family hated the idea of a Roman lover, how much more would they hate a low born foreigner? A runaway slave?

Marella was the sister of Taran di Lusone, *dux* of the Lusone clan. Only the Arevaci had higher status, and for a noble family any scandal of this type would ensure her death. It was untenable, and now he had not just the pregnancy, not just a rumoured lover, but a real life scapegoat.

Oh yes. Yes. This could all come together nicely.

If he could find the stranger, whether the girl had survived or not, her family would be quick to exact revenge on the man they thought she had whored for.

For the first time since darkness had settled, he drew a deeper breath. As his thoughts raced over complications, straightening and smoothing any hitches in his fiction, he even allowed himself a small smile.

Taran wanted her dead and the fiction that went with that was irrelevant, but these things were always much better if all the loose ends could be neatly tied up. Especially loose ends that threatened to tangle around Leucetius himself.

If he'd had a choice, he would have kept the sweet little bitch alive for himself, but her pregnancy had to be explained, and there was no good way to explain a priestess of Diana who was suddenly with child. It was a waste. But she was trouble.

Any other woman would have hidden the problem. A discreet abortion and no one would have been endangered, no one would have been shamed. Leucetius could have had her still, along with a powerful secret to ensure her compliance. If she'd shut her mouth.

Taking a wooden mug from his table, he moved to the decanter and prepared to pour himself some wine. He stopped, smiled again, and went instead to the chalice of Diana. As he filled her goblet to the top with blood red libation, he appraised the image of the goddess tooled into the silver.

"Keep your beauties for yourself, will you, good lady?" Leucetius laughed like a vat of bubbling sulphur and stroked the fine hair of his moustache. "Not while I have any say in it." He laughed again and tipped the wine back into his dry throat. Not while the world gave priests more power than other men. He had that power. And while he had it, he had to ensure he kept it.

But power itself was a shifting concept here.

Iberia, Hispania Tarraconensis as the Roman invaders named the north of the country, was volatile at best. The Lusones, among whom he was staying, shared borders with Euskaldunak and Iberian states as well as fellow tribal Celtiberians. Allegiance and loyalty were like sand and water, they moved with the wind.

Except when it came to family. Loyalty to family was never questioned, and a pact with the *gens nobilis* could only be broken by death. For nobles, there was no crime greater than disrespect for the family honour.

And Rome. Hatred for Rome never failed. Even if men might fight beside them as dedicated warriors or mercenaries, they could never do less than hate Romans. Poor Marella; Lucetius smiled. The outrage alone would kill her. If she was still alive.

For now, if he could find this stranger and convince her family that he was her lover, Leucetius could go back to the comforts of his temple in Okilis and leave these provincial Celtiberian nobles to kill their friends and their enemies in peace.

Some women were more trouble than they were worth.

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Taran clenched a fist around the handle of his beer mug. It would be done by now and the only thing that made the whole foul mess bearable was that their father was not alive to hear the worst himself.

A whore. Damn and curses on the high minded woman.

"So," his wife's voice cut through the darkness he had ignored, stabbing at his ears like an accusation. "It'll be done by now, and you're going to sit and drink yourself into forgetfulness, are you?"

Servants rushed in past her, bringing with them light and heat. Even as he frowned away the fire's intrusion into his funk, she moved into closer range.

"Three deaths, Taran. Strangled. Stabbed. Drowned. Your sister will be three times dead by now and all the beer in your vat won't change that fact." She circled behind him. "Dead. And silent. Just as the priest wanted her."

"It was her choice." He wanted his words to be clear, to be sure and final, but they rasped from his throat like they dragged over gravel.

"Her choice? To die like that?"

"Her choice. In all ways, her choice." His volume increased to cover the pain that rose with it. It was pain born of shame. "Her choice to refuse to marry the Arevaci kinsman. That went close to *my* life she risked when she offended Sarnicio like that.

"Her choice to consecrate herself to the goddess as perpetual virgin. She chose that to escape her responsibilities; you know that as well as I do."

He raised his eyes to meet his wife's cold disdain. "And her choice to whore herself to some Roman scum." He'd said enough. "In all ways this was her choice. Leave me alone with it."

Suelta stood closer to her husband, put her hands down onto his broad shoulders and leaned her support against the strength of his grief. Her words were softer. "I've yet to see any sign of this Roman."

"You don't want me to believe the story she concocted, surely?"

"She is your sister. You know her better than anyone. You know she would die before she'd back away from the truth. She told you it was the priest who fathered her child."

"I know she'd die rather than name the Roman, if she loved the man. She knows I would disembowel him and her beside him." He put a hand up onto hers, pressing her touch against the tension in his neck and back. "We've discussed this all before. If it was the priest, if it was against her will, she would never have waited four full months before she revealed his crime."

"Well, my dearest husband," she rested her lips down onto his hair. "Let's both hope you're right. It'll be over and she will be dead. If she was innocent, her goddess will be after revenge."

"Let's hope we never learn I'm wrong, or I'll hang Leucetius from the city walls by his *cojones*. Let him hope the goddess gets to him before I do."

She nodded. There was nothing to be gained by going over it all again, but the frustration of being powerless to stop this senseless loss was too much to bear in silence.

Marella had been her closest friend. Yes she was headstrong. Yes she was smart-mouthed and too loud. But she was also courageous and principled. She'd avoided a political marriage, and her reasons for that were her own. He'd been a good man. Good family. Wealthy. And the gods only knew if Taran would ever really forgive her for that humiliation.

But in avoiding the marriage arranged for her she'd chosen to forgo marriage entirely. There were vows she could have made that were not as extreme as perpetual virginity.

Then to take a Roman as a lover? Never.

And she was smart. She knew better than to fall pregnant in the first place. If she'd taken a lover, any lover, even gods forbid it, a Roman, she would have had the sense to keep his seed out of her belly. If all else had failed, if she'd wanted a child, knowing what it would cost her and her family, she would have fled. She would have taken her lover and his bastard and she would have run. The world was a big place and growing bigger with every Roman day. She had no reason to die for a man.

And Marella was not a liar. However it might have happened, even if it seemed too far-fetched for words, the priest was responsible if Marella said he was.

As long as men had power over the lives of their women, he would be believed and she would be condemned. The knowledge bunched into her hand and she tapped it against her leg in irritation.

[top]

CHAPTER TWO.

As her mind struggled toward a lighter place, a range of pains assaulted Marella, each intent on calling itself to her attention first. Every breath pulled at torn muscles over her stomach and ribs. She swallowed against bruises that felt like jagged stones lodged inside her throat, and her shoulders ached deep in the joint as if they'd been twisted into dislocation.

Cramps burned low in her belly, hot and steady. Biting down on the pain in her arm, she slid her hand down across the bare skin of her stomach, reaching for certainty. There was no bloodstain on the fingertips she raised before her eyes, so it wasn't certainty she found, only a confusing sense of relief.

Firelight cast soft moving shadows around an unfamiliar room. Closer to the fire, on a form of couch, a stranger sat with a sleeping child on his lap. His hair was long and fair, pulled back from his temples. He was gazing steadily at her, watching in silence for signs of life. When he realized she was awake, he smiled gently.

Rising to his feet, he lifted the child, whispering softly into his sleeping ears as he rested him into a small pallet by the hearth. He took down the kettle and poured heated water into an earthenware mug, added a large dollop of honey, and walked to where she lay.

"Poppy," he said. His voice was deep, heavily accented, his tongue more used to Latin, the language of the Imperial army. He dropped to a squat, bringing his face nearer to her level and looked at her through shadows of dark concern.

"For the pain," he said. There was more to his accent. He wasn't Roman. By his colouring he wasn't in any way local. His eyes were clear, vivid blue and there were reddish tints in the stubble on his chin. His right arm was tattooed deep blue from wrist to shoulder.

He placed the mug on the floor beside him and carefully slipped an arm under her shoulders to help her sit. She whimpered as her shoulders flexed and he froze. "Slowly," he whispered. "I'll put some rugs behind you to lean on. Are you all right?"

Staring blankly at his concern, she waited, searching for threats in words that she couldn't understand. When he'd wadded rugs and furs into a mound, he encouraged her to lean back and handed her the mug of steeped opiate.

She could see no immediate reason to fear this man, but she clutched the covers tight over her nakedness. His nearness made her overly aware of the slip of the linen over her bare skin, and her heartbeat skipped over short tight breaths. His movements were deliberately slow. His face showed only compassion. And sympathy. The darkness around his eyes held memories of loss, as if he shared her pain.

"Where am I?" Her throat hurt with the words as she tried her own halting Latin, hoping he would understand.

Relief lit his eyes and he looked around to indicate the room. "My house. We're near to the Gallego River, a short way up from where it meets the Iberus."

"Slowly." She shook her head. "I speak a little Latin." She held her fingertips in a pinch to show how little.

He nodded. "I speak a little Celtiberian. Very little. A little Greek. Latin or Celtic."

She pulled the cover in tight under her arms and lifted the mug to her lips. It was hot and bitter, but he'd been generous with the dried seedpods and it would soon wash the worst of the pain from her mind.

"I dragged you from the river. At sundown. There were Druids. Priests." He stumbled through words, looking for the clearest way to explain. "They beat you pretty badly."

Her expression tugged towards tears, but she had none. She was exhausted by pain and could only nod her head to show she remembered. "Why am I still alive?"

He shrugged and stood back, rising above her like the mountains. "I killed a couple of the priests. Two of them ran off. They didn't get a chance to finish their sacrifice." He was very tall. Taller by far than her own brother. He wore a long, dark brown kilt of woven wool with a wide leather belt at his hips and a sleeveless linen tunic.

Watching him in wary silence, she sipped her tea. His movement was easy and balanced; he was comfortable with the bulk of his chest and shoulders. But he moved too slowly. He seemed to carry a weight or pain that made his joints stiff, or he had no reason to move any more than necessary.

The hands that hung at his hips were not the callused spades of a farmer. His fingers were long, tanned by the sun, and old scars crossed his forearm.

"Those you killed...." She paused, searching for words. "Was the High Priest one of them?" She touched her hair and her fingers described a string of beads as she added, "An older man, wearing beads. His robe was black."

Marc shook his head. "Their robes were all dark. Their heads were covered. I didn't look for jewellery." Even when he'd returned to the river for his knives and the day's water, he'd paid no attention to the corpses. Not for Druids.

Already the strong poppy tea was seeping into her head. It wrapped warm fingers around the cramps in her belly, easing the contractions, and misted through her thoughts. There were things too important to ignore, things she needed to ask. She wanted to move, but her body refused to sustain her. The need for rest was a solid weight, as real and as crucial as the air she breathed. She relaxed back into the mound of bedding and closed her eyes for just a moment. She needed sleep.

When she drifted away, Marc carefully lifted the half empty mug from her hand. Her fingers twitched and her eyelids fluttered at the movement, but her need for rest pushed past her fears and she settled back into the furs and slept.

In the weak shadowed light, her skin was dark against the white of his linen. Her hair was dark, its true colour hidden in knots and clots of dried blood, and it kinked in waves down over her shoulders.

Beneath the covers, he knew, her body was all long smooth lines and perfect skin. Her curves were rounded, ripe and full, and she lay like Venus in his bed. A small frown touched her brow as she slept, and shadows darkened the crescents under her thick eyelashes. She looked like something from a dream or a legend. Unreal. Utterly, achingly helpless.

His hand went to the fine golden strand at his throat. Through the evening he had worked on it, tying it back on itself and clasping it with a tiny gold hairpin he'd flattened.

She wasn't so helpless. He'd given her a chance, at least. If her injuries were not too severe, she would be able to move about tomorrow. Then she would go back to where ever she came from and life would go on.

For those still alive.

Rolling his shoulders to shake off lingering tension, he moved back to the couch and settled himself to sleep.

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Cooking smells cleared narcotic fogs from her head and Marella opened her eyes. Rolling small movements down her body like a wave, she felt for the extent of her injuries. Every part of her hurt, but the residual poppy took the edge off the worst and she judged none of it fatal.

Already her flesh was considering its healing, and the smells reminded her how long it had been since she'd eaten. Beside her, a small face stared wide-eyed from a hand's breadth away.

The child's eyes were darkest brown, his olive skin was tanned, and his fine straight hair was as black as soot. He might have been her own kin. When they were small, her nephews had the same dark, robust health in their cheeks and the same sparkling curiosity in their eyes.

He was no part of the stranger. Even if he was coloured for his mother, he had no part of the man who stood by the fire.

"Dad," he called. "The lady is awake."

So he called the child his own. Perhaps he'd been deceived. It wouldn't be the first time. It must have been an interesting day when this little one came into the world.

Carefully she moved her head, taking in the room around her. There was one other dark doorway beside the hearth, a table and some stools. By the foot of the bed, a small squared trunk sat with its lid propped open, but there was no woman to be seen.

The stranger approached her bed, holding a bowl forward like a votive. He smiled again, and it seemed the expression fitted his face, as if it might once have been his natural state. Mutton and rosemary steamed at her and her empty stomach answered with a growl.

"I'll get you bread," he said simply, still uncertain which language best suited their communication. "Do you want poppy tea?"

Wincing over her effort to reach for the bowl, she nodded. "Yes."

The stew was mutton, onion and olives thickened to a porridge by tomato and grain. She barely managed a show of dignity as she shovelled it into the emptiness. Hunger made her weak and the spoon trembled as it raced food into her mouth.

He sat at the table with the child, eating while the mug of tea steeped. When she sopped the bottom of her bowl with bread, he stood and carried the tea into her reach.

"There are clothes," he pointed to the trunk. "My wife was smaller." His hands had mimed breasts before he caught them and snatched them from the air in embarrassment, and he rushed on, looking quickly at his feet. "I warmed water. If you need help, send the boy for me." He turned on his heel and strode from the shadows out into the bright sun of the morning. A shrill whistle called two dogs to his side as he moved to release his stock.

Pain made her light-headed when she twisted to put her feet on the floor, and she breathed through the worst, waiting until she felt she could find the strength to stand. Pulling the cover around under her arms, she shuffled painfully to the end of the bed and leaned to sort through the items neatly folded into the trunk.

The clothes were fit for a noble. Several long soft *tunicas* in pale linen and flannel topped the pile, but under them were the finest fabrics she had ever seen: silks and translucent shawls; brightly coloured cloths with beaded fringes and gilded threads.

Whoever had owned them was petite. The long narrow *tunicas* were of no use at all; they would never fit around her chest and hips. But several of the finer silks were closely gathered under the bust, and brooches clasped the shoulder and elbow in the Roman style.

She chose one in darkest blue with a fine golden strip at each edge, and moved past the child into the darkened washroom doorway. When she had washed and dressed, the opium had again worked its magic, and she limped slowly, but less painfully, out into the sun in pursuit of her rescuer.

From the doorway, she squinted against the white glare and asked, "Where is your Papa?"

The boy used his carved wooden horse as a pointer, turning as he crammed the last of his bread into his mouth. "He's cutting more wood."

There was no sign of him in the cleared yard, no sound anywhere around the hut.

"Where is your Mamma?"

"Gone," he answered bluntly.

She looked around the harsh morning sunlight again and slowly moved back to sit on a stool near the child. "Where has she gone?"

His face tensed like the question had confused him, but he answered, "She went to the goddess."

Skilful hands had carved his horse. The strokes of a blade left the curves facetted, and the features were blunt and lacking detail, but the strength and movement of the beast were frozen in the soft wood. "Which goddess?" she asked. "Epona?" Goddess of the *alae*? The goddess of a cavalryman?

"Luperca."

The answer from behind startled her and she twisted too sharply, sucking in a sharp breath of pain.

The tight set of the stranger's brow spoke of annoyance and she turned to face him squarely. "I looked for you," she said in response to his silent allegations.

He nodded, dismissing the subject, and walked to the fireside to stack an armload of wood.

There was too much concern in his eyes. Lines of laughter had tanned into his face, but he seemed reluctant to smile. There was a weight on his broad shoulders that didn't sit well. His strength was as eroded as the mountains, washed and blown away leaving only muscle and sinew.

His pale gaze cut the shadows. He was studying her, she could feel him weighing the questions he had to ask and looking for a safe place to start. But she had questions of her own. Racking her memory for the Latin she had learned as a child, she started, "Thank you for your help."

His brow eased and she went on. "If your wife is 'gone', who cared for me while I was asleep?"

"I did," he said softly. His words were as calm and certain as stone and there was nothing to say in answer. He had been her only helper when she had been helpless and alone. Against the best of her reasoning, burning frustration rose in her throat.

It was beyond reason. Her pain welled up on springs of shame and humiliation. It needed no logic. The child in her belly had been planted there by a man without her consent. She had been helpless then, vulnerable. Now this stranger had handled her nakedness. Her need was incidental to her sense of outrage. She felt frustrated and violated.

Anger climbed up to disguise compound emotions. "There was no woman here?"

The stranger shook his head slightly, meeting her glare with the same calm, detached compassion as he moved back around the table.

"I am a Virgin, consecrated in perpetuity to the goddess." Tears rose into her eyes and bled into her voice. "You had no right to put your eyes or your hands on me."

He sat. Turning to face her, either unmoved or unsurprised by her anger, and said, "You needed help and I gave you what help I could." His voice held the same steady resonance. Calm. Irrefutable. "It wasn't much, but you were nearly dead and now you're not. It's the best I could offer."

Slaps itched in her fingertips; all the frustration of her situation ached to throw itself into fists. Everything about her circumstance was unfair, it was unbearable. She was helpless and hopeless. She was angry at the whole world, even the gods, and justifiably so. She formed her words into weapons and threw them against him, instead.

"My brother is Taran, *Dux* of the Lusones. And that High Priest you saw has accused me of taking a Roman lover." She sucked in a breath that howled against the dry damage in her throat, waiting to see him register the magnitude of that insult.

He seemed to accept that much without distress.

She forced her spine straighter and continued, "He lied. He raped me and he lied. Now I'm sentenced to death on account of those lies. Even my family have turned me away." Her voice broke. "And now, I have nowhere safe to go." There was nowhere safe in a world ordered by men, for men. Through no fault of her own, she had brought terrible shame on the whole family. She had nowhere safe, and the man who'd harmed her walked around free. "Do you understand what I'm saying? What that means to someone in my position?"

Leaning forward into his palms, he braced his elbows on his knees and rubbed his chin. New concerns showed in his eyes. "The Druid, how many men will answer to him?"

Confusion spurred her heart into disordered rhythm. "What do you mean, answer to him? He's a magistrate. My brother will send men for him, so will the Romans. But there's no threat from the priesthood itself. The novices are servants of the gods, not vessels for revenge."

"Perhaps I've only met the few bad ones, then," he said. "How many novices?"

"The temple is in Okilis. Here, there aren't more than half a dozen young men."

He raised an eyebrow and flashed an enigmatic grin. "Minus three." He straightened. "What kind of man is your brother? Will he listen to reason? Have you spoken to him about this?"

Had she spoken to her brother? Did he think there was a simple solution that might have saved her life and she'd just not bothered to look for it? Again confusion clouded the best way to respond. She had thrown the utter hopelessness of her case at him, challenging his aloofness. Anyone with a heart would see the answer in her fear. There were no solutions, only death.

Maybe she'd misunderstood. "Have I spoken to my brother?" She looked at him, considering who he actually was. Just a shepherd, a foreign farmer, at worst, a Roman soldier. What would he know of her shame, or the enormity of this insult?

"That's right." He stood abruptly and turned to the child beside him. "Nico, gather your clothes, lad."

To Marella he said, "If your brother is the one with all the power here, he's the one you have to have onside. Isn't he? The Druid can't harm you if you have ducal protection."

The little boy ran to his pallet, wrapping a small wad of possessions together in a bundle, while the stranger disappeared into the washroom and emerged with a water skin and a leather satchel.

"Where are we going, Dad?" The child looked up, wide-eyed with excitement.

"To Bastien's house. I want you to stay there with his family for a while."

The boy jumped around, pleased by the news, then ran to put his horse into his package.

Selecting a collection of staples from the shelf by the hearth, her rescuer packed the satchel. Moving to the bed and rolling a blanket into a tight wad, he shoved that too into the bag. Marella watched him in silent confusion until he was satisfied with his selections and came to sit near her again.

"Well?" he asked. "Can you approach him? Have you explained yourself to him?"

"Of course." The annoyance she had drawn on earlier rushed back to settle on her lips.

"So he's of no help to you? Will he hear an appeal or is he too bloody minded?"

"He believes the High Priest. Everyone believes the High Priest. Why wouldn't they? He's the magistrate. And...." She stopped dead. Trying to explain what had happened was a waste of time and effort. No one believed the truth. She struggled with her own conclusions.

Taran was of no help, but there was one person who might have heard her out, who might have believed her and argued her case.

"His wife is my dearest friend. She might have believed me. She could possibly convince my brother on my behalf, if she knows I'm alive." Again she pursed her lips in bitter frustration. "But there is so much shame involved for our family. Our lineage traces five hundred years of Warrior Elites. Taran could never forgive this sort of scandal. Not an association with a Roman or some other low born peasant."

He smiled without humour. "I see."

"Oh." She tried too late to catch the insulting implications. "I'm sorry, I didn't...."

Without speaking, he moved to the trunk and dug down into its depths to bring out a pair of ladies' sandals. Kneeling on the packed earth in front of her, he took one of her feet and with tenderness at odds with his size, he slipped it onto her foot and began to lace it up.

"I don't understand." She slipped into her native tongue and pulled her foot from his warm fingers, away from where it rested on his thigh. "I can't travel. I told you, I have nowhere safe I can go. If you send me out there alone now, it'd be better if I'd died in the river."

“I’m not asking you to travel, not far anyway.” He moved a hand around the room, pointing at everything and nothing. “This is all I have. My few sheep, my dogs, and my boy.

“You have an angry Druid after you. Your brother’s a noble; he’ll have a hundred men at his call and the family honour to defend. May I?” He took her foot again and continued tying the sandal into place. “Soon they’ll be coming after me.

“You’re right. You can’t travel. And for the moment, you don’t have anywhere you can go. I can stand for myself when they come, but I won’t keep my son here while I wait.”

Marella looked long and hard at this shepherd who had accidentally risked all he had for her safety. He was a man of honour, or at least he appeared to be. She would never have believed there were men of chivalry among the foreign rabble of the Iberian tribes. And worse, there was too much of the Roman about him.

And yet he knelt before her, his gentle fingers brushing the skin of her ankle. Not in deference to her family or position, but as if her need alone made her worthy of the service.

“Who are you?” she asked, tilting her head at the confusing opposites he presented.

“I don’t have a name anymore,” he said, taking her second foot and gently threading the laces over and around it.

“You have a name, you must. What do people call you?”

“People call me Marcus. Just Marc. Nothing more.”

She frowned and nodded slightly. “It takes a lot for a man to leave his name behind, and a home with it I would guess. How far away is your homeland?”

“Too far. The end of the earth. Caledonia.”

“You’re not Roman? Not by birth or by service?”

He finished his work at her feet and stood, close, so she was looking up past the expanse of his chest to his face. “I told you, I have no name and no history. Certainly nothing you’ll need to know once you’re well enough to leave.

“But you can tell me something. Why doesn’t anyone believe your story? You wouldn’t be the first child in a temple to be used by a priest.”

She turned away from the piercing intensity of his gaze. He had a way of looking past her features, as if he could see through her to read her secrets and her shames. He could see there was more to her story, and he meant to hear it. To know it all, so he too could judge her. Once more. She would tell the story just once more and hear his judgment. He’d traded his safety for hers. She owed him that much.

“I wasn’t consecrated into service as a child. I dedicated myself to Diana a year ago, when my family arranged a marriage.

“My service had nothing to do with the High Priest, nor his with me. Except for a very occasional ritual or fastening. Not often at all. But he started coming to me in dreams.

“I resisted them, really, I did. I even tried not sleeping at all, but the dreams persisted. He would come to my bed and I couldn’t move. I couldn’t speak.” Her fingernails pushed into her palms, remembering the nightmare face above her. Remembering the stasis and the silent screaming in her head. Remembering her icy dread the day she realized she was pregnant.

Her sharp words dragged the taste of blood into her mouth and her voice became hoarse and grainy, as if all those stifled screams still clustered in her throat. “It was awful, I couldn’t believe it. But when I finally challenged him, he went to my family

with the story that I had been caught with a Roman soldier." She looked up at him, searching for a sneer of disbelief or mockery in his eyes.

"It's only in the epics that the gods come in dreams," she said. "In the real world, my family's ashamed and the man is held blameless. That's the story. And you can see why no one believes me."

He looked to the child. "Are you ready lad?" Nico stood at his father's side, clutching his bundle of possessions. To Marella, Marc said, "I'm taking the boy up the valley a good way. There's a family there he can stay with." There was nothing in his face to show he'd heard her. His expression hadn't changed, there was no derision, and no sign he would hold his judgment against her.

"It's too far for you to walk, but along the path there is an old den, just a small cave among the rocks. I want you to wait for me there, in case anyone comes looking for you, or me, while I'm away. I'll be back well before sundown. You'll be safe there for the time being and it will give you time to decide how you can fight this thing."

Scooping the child up onto his arm, he held out a free hand to help Marella stand. He hefted the food pack over a shoulder and ushered her to the door. As they stepped into the sun, he turned back to look at the house, saying, "Tell your goddess.... No. On second thoughts, tell her nothing. If this is how she keeps her servants safe, she'll do nothing at all for me."

[top]

CHAPTER THREE.

Leucetius uncrossed his ankles and lifted them from the couch. There were possibilities in all this that went beyond solving this one problem.

He hadn't slept, but that made no difference in the end. He did his best thinking under pressure. The grey pre-dawn light often carried with it solutions not visible in the harsher light of day. In the day there were noises, faces, questions. Without them, he could better consider his own desires.

The deferential knock had come sooner than he expected, but not too soon. Careful to allow a dignified period of silence, he moved to the doorway and pulled aside the drapes.

He wasted no more time on civility. "Well?"

The young man shook. Malignancy rose in the air around his superior. The man filled him with visceral terror; his bowels were heavy and seething, his throat closed. "There's not much to tell, Sir. No one knows him for certain, although many people know of him. It seems he lives alone on the banks of the Gallego River, a short way into the valley. He grazes sheep.

"Some say he has a wife, others that he's a mystic. Some say he is a fugitive from Rome and others a hero from Germania. Everyone agrees that he keeps to himself and troubles no one."

Leucetius restrained his hand. It was the blind stupidity of people that made them so easy to control. This boy was only voicing the opinions of the local fools.

"Everyone agrees? Although no one knows him?" He pulled the curtain wider and dragged the boy in with his eyes. "Plainly he does cause trouble. He killed three of your brother priests in plain sight."

"But," the boy stammered and froze.

“He was intent on saving the girl?” The older man held him still. “And what was his reason for doing that? Why was he there? Who saves a condemned prisoner?

“A mystic, you think? No mystic violates the oaths of another. This, my young ... man.” His tongue spun contempt into the last word. The youth’s name escaped him. Even the face was a bland collection of adolescent features. “This is the mysterious lover we have been looking for. He’s the one I suspected.”

The novice’s eyes betrayed his confusion, but he managed to stifle foolish doubts.

“Is there a name?” Leucetius asked the question softly; the boy was near to fainting with fatigue and the shocks of the night. He was afraid, and that sort of fear could be useful. And dangerous.

“No name. Those that think he’s running say he is a Briton. If he’s Teutonic, no one knows what his feats were, or when or where.”

The priest nodded, rifling through the paucity of fact, trying to make a feasible whole. “He lives in the valley. Someone knows where?”

The youth nodded.

“Good. Go.” He clapped the boy’s shoulder, making him flinch. “You need to rest. I’ll go to the ducal *casa* and tell the noble Taran that we’ve found the man who caused this shame.”

He paused. “Before you go, see that my horse is ready.”

There were too few to accompany him. The three dead men had been his escort, and the man he was going after had killed them all in a matter of moments. “Then go to the square and pay a mercenary guard for me. I want two or three armed men. I’ll need support if I’m to find this man and bring him back to the family. He can answer their questions. If he survives. That’s all.”

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Marella rested down into the nest of her blanket in the shade of the rocky outcrop and awaited his return.

He was a puzzle, this one. All blue eyes and blonde hair. An alien. A shepherd, with a shepherd’s goddess. Luperca, a wolf to keep their sheep from harm. But the leather food satchel that sat at her feet and the water skin she held were Roman. Roman army. If he wasn’t a citizen, he’d been an auxiliary. Or a mercenary.

Either way he had been a soldier.

The way he carried himself was lynx-like; restraint over tension, the taut clench of muscle under quiet speech and gentle hands. Even the memory drew a subtle warmth out against her skin. He was strong, capable, confident. But what soldier would want to hide himself in these harsh hills? What Briton would be far enough from home that he could leave behind his name and his past? And why?

Whoever he was, for the moment, he was all she had.

Being in any way indebted to a man rankled, but as her body settled around its aches and bruises, the possibility of letting someone else take charge was persuasive. And he did appear competent to do just that. For a little while. For now, there was no need to tell him about her pregnancy. It was a shame she need share with no one else.

Pain and fatigue amplified her sense of helplessness and grievance.

It was bad enough that others knew about her rape. If she’d been believed, Leucetius would be dead and the whole business, including the foetus, would have been discretely dealt with.

As it was, her name was worthless, her reputation shot, and the child was a glaring indictment of guilt. No one else need know about it. If she survived, she could rid herself of the problem privately. If she survived, she would have to.

She had followed his instructions carefully, staying in the shade, resting, and drinking often from the water skin. And now she could sleep. She could close her eyes and let the day drag itself to an end.

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Marc rubbed the ball of his thumb into his cupped palm as he walked, pushing away the sweat of apprehension. There was an ambiguous spring in his step, neither excitement nor dread but something in between. With his boy safe, he could at last acknowledge the tight knot in his stomach. Crises loomed ahead and he was anxious to meet them, whatever form they took.

The girl was incidental. What she chose to do with her situation was her problem. But in saving her life, he had inadvertently brought her enemies to his own door. He couldn't pretend he was entirely disappointed.

For too long he had hidden his face in the pale stone and harsh scrub of these hillsides. As long as he had responsibilities outside himself, his wife and child, he had been content to live in peaceful contemplation. But with Neria gone...

He clenched a fist in frustration. There wasn't a living foe he would run from. He would match himself against anyone in open competition. But life had a way of throwing up battles no man could hope to win. Too many times he had borne the cruel burden of helplessness. That frustration burned like a war cry in his chest.

The yearning for action, for success, even retribution or revenge, was heat low in his belly. Every step worked his need like a bellows in a furnace of undirected rage. Fires burned up under his ribs, twisting his gut against too many years of ineffectuality.

There were too many victims in the world. Too many heedless victors. And at last, from the clear blue sky and the rushing brown waters of the river, life had handed him a chance to fight back. He had no intention of wasting that chance.

Marella woke from restless sleep, startled from her fractious murmuring against the hard ground by his sudden appearance. Her legs were stiff, and the bruises on her stomach had gathered under the skin like thunderheads. "You frightened me," she snapped, clutching a handful of silk to cover the tremble in her fingers. "It's late. You said you'd be back before sundown."

"The sun isn't down," he said. Amusement shone from his eyes, a small laugh at her expense. "Not yet, anyway. But it will be soon. How are you? Can you manage the walk back to the hut?"

"I can manage." The indignation in her tone seemed to feed his sense of humour, and she bit down on the stabs and strains of her injured body as she fought to stand upright. She was not at all certain she could manage, but she would fall to the stones before she would say that aloud. "Do you think it's safe now? Can we go back?"

There was lightness in his stride; a tension ran through him that hadn't been evident in the early morning. A new light shone from his eyes and a grin stretched his mouth into something other than a smile.

"I don't know. I won't know until we get closer." His voice was level, his breathing unaffected. "If anyone is coming after you, they'll have come by now. What we don't know yet is if they're still there. Or if they'll come back." Either way, she knew she would struggle to cope, and her pulse rose in fear.

“I’m more worried about how strong you feel at the moment.” He stepped forward, slipping a strong hand under her elbow as she tried to straighten. Cramps and bruises contracted in her abdomen and a whimper leaked from her mouth as she hunched back over the pain.

“Don’t try to rush.” Compassion flicked past his smile. “Whatever they’ve done, a few more minutes, sunlight or darkness, it won’t make the slightest difference.”

Her hand clenched in a show of autonomy, but there was no real strength in the resistance. And there was no condescension in his help. His eyes stroked concern gently over her cheek, without judgment or ridicule. And that concern centred itself on her; she could feel his study even without meeting his gaze. “I could leave you here,” he suggested. “Go down to check the situation and then come back for you.”

She shook her head, closing her eyes as she made her body straighten. “Don’t leave me here again. I’ll be all right. I need a moment to stretch out, that’s all.”

“We can wait.”

As he moved away, gathering the few possessions that littered the floor of the den, Marella wondered again at the kind of man she had found.

Marc rolled the blanket over his arm and lifted the water skin, judging by its weight how much she’d been able to drink. Not enough. Grey shadows crawled over her cheeks and her eyes were tight with pain. He held it back toward her. “Drink,” he said stiffly.

He’d expected more grief, although that might still come. For the moment anger and resentment, frustration and something that looked a little like contempt, were riding close to the surface. That too was incidental. He held her in no debt. Her anger and hurt were well founded, if misplaced. Once she was well enough to move on, she could aim them at more carefully chosen targets.

He moved to face her squarely, watching her reactions, trying to judge just how much suffering she was trying to hide. “Have you thought any more on where you can go or what you want to do about this mess?”

“Yes.” Her eyes dodged his, flashing past uncertainties she didn’t want to share. “I need to get to the temple of Diana. The sisterhood will keep me safe, there.”

“Are you sure?”

Her nostrils flared and her chin dimpled over strains. “Why wouldn’t they?”

“Why didn’t they? You’re alone here.” He’d touched the heart of her fear; her eyes told him that plainly. No one had believed her. No matter what she was telling herself, she had no real confidence in any sanctuary. “If the men of the world ignored your accusations, why didn’t your sister priestesses stand beside you?”

“Because they still live in a man’s world,” she snapped, and he backed away from the debate, looking away from her justifications. He regretted the question as soon as it was uttered. He could guess the answer.

The girls who served the goddesses were the stuff of fantasy on many a long campaign. In dreams, they looked like Marella here: Priestess of Diana, perpetual virgin. The truth was sadly distant from the legend. Most of the women devoted to service were the plainest of the plain. Daughters of peasants without dowries or hope of finding a husband.

Or those who had no desire for a man or a marriage. Every soldier, maybe every man in the empire, knew the stories of the wands and chalices, the daggers and *vesicas*: the beautiful untouchables who despised the touch of men; who reduced masculinity to a phallus and then made their own.

This priestess wasn't young, well past marriageable age, somewhere in her early twenties. Under the damage and debris of her ordeal lay a rare beauty. She was a noble by birth, but had somehow avoided forced marriage until a year ago.

So, with enough wealth to support the kind of choices most of the girls had never had, she had rejected that rich, comfortable life. Then she'd elected to take vows that placed her above those who chose lesbian unions as well. All up it seemed possible she'd offended everyone, in and outside the temple, including her own family.

That left her an obvious target, and one without much hope for rescue.

"Okay." He nodded again at the water skin in her hand, encouraging her to drink. "The temple it is, then. As soon as you can travel, I'll see you get there."

She was more fragile than she was going to admit. Leaving her here as darkness fell was not an idea he liked. For himself, he had no fear of the wolves in the area, but while she was alone and injured they would be a serious threat to this girl.

A frown pulled itself tighter over his brow while he considered how much strength she had. Under her physical weakness, she had found enough resolve to steady herself against falling. It was too hard to assess how far that resolve was going to carry her.

He watched her for a moment longer. "What about your brother. Or his wife. Is it possible they will help you if you can get word to them?"

She drank. But the effort of holding herself rigid was beginning to take its toll. When she answered there was an edge in her voice that suggested a precipice too close for comfort. "I don't know." She paused and sipped again. "I hope so. But I don't know. He doesn't believe me."

"You say he's a soldier. Does he fight? Or does he claim his men's victories from the safety of his villa?"

The slur on her family honour sent a jolt of righteous indignation up her spine that almost jarred the water skin from her hands. "Why?" she sneered. "Are you suddenly afraid to face him?"

"No." He tried to stifle a grin. The old battle rush and urgency rose in his blood at the thought, but that was not why he asked. "I think any commander who's been on the front lines could figure out how the priest would have done this thing to you."

This time the water skin did fall from her hand and he faced her squarely, letting her take the strength she needed from his words. "There isn't a peasant or a farmer anywhere in the empire who doesn't know to steep poppy seedpods for pain and sleep. There isn't a soldier who has ever been on the front lines who doesn't know that you mix poppy and henbane with vinegar and gall to put a man to sleep for surgery. And there isn't a Celt alive who doesn't know the Druids know at least as much about herb lore as the surgeons do."

Shock and revulsion spread over her face. She was weak, tired and angry, and he wondered how long it would take her to work through all the implications of that knowledge. He was banking on hope and anger registering first. When she had the luxury of time to consider it all, the heartbreak of betrayal would take their place. For now, it was hope that would carry her through whatever lay at the house ahead of them.

"So." He moved her thoughts in the direction he needed her to go. "When you get to talk to your brother again, you can tell him how it could be possible. And then the Druid will be the one with nowhere safe to go."

When she looked up into his face, he saw her eyes as if for the first time.

She was close, and they were as dark and soft as the boy's. There were depths in them where a man might wander, lost, for years. They held him fixed, searching the litter of his pain and past longings. For that long moment, they touched a need deep in his own heart.

“I wasn’t dreaming,” she said aloud to confirm her truth to herself, reaching to hold his forearm like a touchstone.

He shook his head, reluctantly tearing his gaze from hers. She was shaking. Bending to lift the water bag, he found his eyes searching hers again as he straightened. “No,” he said. “You weren’t dreaming.”

Her lips were full, trembling over tears of relief, dark in the failing light. Her breath came in sharp gasps, and her tongue touched her mouth with a lick of moisture that caught the soft glow of sunset. Her fingertips were warm against his arm.

Marc stepped back. She was soft. Her eyes. Her mouth. The full rounded curves of her body. Everything about her contrasted with the harsh, comfortless world around him. Inside, something yearned toward her, longing to be wrapped up in this tenderness.

His face fell and he turned away, looking down the trail, suddenly anxious to be moving. “Let’s go.” His words were rough, and he cleared his throat. “If you need to stop, tell me. When we get nearer the house, I’ll go in alone and see what’s happening.” He looked back to her eyes and away.

What strength she still had was firming in her; she was as ready to move as she would ever be. Watching his feet, he picked the smoothest path down between the trees.

Marella followed, stumbling blindly over non-existent obstacles. None of her senses were applied to the world as she turned her attention in on the realization he’d brought.

She could explain herself. She could be vindicated.

A smile that hinted at vengeance touched her mouth and fled into the lines of a tight grimace. Now, Leucetius. Your prey won’t be so easy to torment, not so helpless and vulnerable. His face came too easily to mind, sharp and supercilious. It wasn’t easy to fit fear into the features, but she would live to see it. She would live to hear him plead for his life.

None of her aches and pains called her. Her uneven step jarred, but she was numb, anxious to get back into the city, entirely focused on revenge. When Marc stopped suddenly in front of her, she blundered on into his back, snapping her face up to his.

He leaned close in the thick darkness, placed a finger deliberately over her lips and raised the water for her to drink. Without her notice, her breath had grown laboured, rasping over inflammation in her throat and pulling against her stiffening bruises as she breathed out. The water helped.

Silently, Marc piled the blanket down onto the path and motioned for her to sit, signalling again with a finger to his own mouth, then moved quietly into the shadows.

In the dark between sundown and moonrise, he clung to the deeper shade of the trees as he crouched forward to the rise above the house.

There was shuffled movement and the hollow clack of the milker’s bell. The sheep made an occasional confused bleat as the dogs moved restlessly, following their routine even without their master’s call.

There was smoke on the air, but the house was still standing. If it had been razed they would have known well before now. The wind was running up from the river. Whoever had a fire, they had chosen to camp near water. They were making no great effort to hide. Either they were confident he’d abandoned the house, or they had no reason to fear him coming back.

That meant skill or numbers. Or bravado. He grinned and moved quietly through the tangled undergrowth, circling the hut and hugging the deepest shadows.

As he neared the rear of the building where the stockyards leaned back into the surrounding shrubs, he whistled, soft and low, and brought the dogs to his side in a rush

of welcome. A snap of his fingers and harsh point at the ground brought them silently to heel and he moved on through the darkness, following the breeze to a fire.

Three horses were hobbled on the riverbank; two men sat back at the edge of a circle of firelight. One unaccounted. Damn. Squatting in the shadows, he watched them, waiting.

If the third man was on watch over the camp … Marc made out the most obvious place for a sentry, scouring the darkness for movement. If the watch was set up at the house, his best plan of action would be to take these two out, quickly and silently.

Letting the rush of adrenaline pulse new life through his veins, Marc grinned silently at the dogs beside him. His heartbeat was steadier than it should have been, rising above the thrill and settling on unnatural calm, as his breath became slow and deep. His hearing pricked like the rash of sweat on his skin, raising his senses to meet the need. His eyes gathered light, carving clarity from the murk around him. Absently, his thumb tested the razor edge of a knife.

Marella was alone and at risk. He didn't want to wait here, couldn't leave her any longer than he had to, but he needed to be sure.

Her scream stabbed through the night and he moved on instinct. Crouching into a run, he ordered the dogs forward. The men at the fire stood, turning as one toward the scream. Before they could reach for the weapons at their feet, the bitch had broken the circle of light and leapt at the back of the nearest man.

The second drew a *gladius*, the short flat sword of a Roman infantryman, and spun to the aid of his fallen friend. He hadn't time to raise the blade before Marc's dirk buried deep into his unguarded ribs.

Again the girl screamed, the sound cutting easily over the struggles and garbled cries of the men at the fire.

Max had entered the fray.

Marc froze, torn for an instant between ensuring their deaths and the desperate plea in Marella's hoarse scream. Leaving them to the dogs, he turned and sprinted through the darkness, up the bank toward the house. Silently he begged the night, 'fight girl; let me hear where you are.'

Muffled cries and grunts of exertion disturbed the stock and they bustled nervously, darting, panicked, out into the nearby bushes.

There. The shades of a man, twisted and writhing near the door of the house. Marella was still on her feet.

The other two were veterans, retired infantrymen, armed with Roman weapons, not the broadswords or daggers preferred by the Celts. He was going to assume the same for this opponent. From his calf strap he drew the longest of his dirks. It was only a foot from tip to hilt, small against the range of a *gladius*, but it would suffice. He flicked a smaller dagger up into his left hand, flipping it to hold the blade, and moved to slip between the rails of the stockyard.

When the wall of the house obscured what he could see of his goal, he strained his ears for the sounds of her struggle. She was weakening fast. The staccato sobs of helplessness had replaced determination, and the man no longer had to fight to hold her.

Fury raged in his chest and burned up into his throat, longing for a scream of release.

Biting down on his own lip until blood flowed over his teeth and down his chin, Marc moved quietly over the low rail and stepped out to face the threat.

In the darkness he could just find an outline, blurred by movement and distorted by the burden he held. The knives were hard in his grip, numbing his fingertips with pressure, and he flipped the smaller blade, forcing his hands to flex.

His opponent was still, judging his own peril, weighing the benefit of holding the girl as cover, against the freedom to move in defence.

"Just you and me, now," Marc hissed, tasting the blood that sprayed away from his lip on each word. He held himself still, bending at the knees to disguise his height advantage.

While the veteran held Marella, he couldn't move away, and Marc couldn't risk striking in the dark. If he dropped her, he would need to move fast. Marc was ready.

"Run," he said, goading the older man into decisive movement.

The veteran chuckled in the darkness. "I'm here to get you, my friend," he said. There was not even a hint of sweat in his voice. "Why would I run?" He whistled so sharp and loud Marc involuntarily flinched away from the sound.

But it was his turn to laugh. "They're not coming." He grinned. "They're already dead."

The vet needed no more time to assess his position. Throwing Marella aside, he launched himself into close combat. The broad blade of his sword hissed through the air, catching the cloth of Marc's shirt, drawing a line of ice over the skin of his stomach.

Stepping forward before the backswing, Marc jerked the long dirk up, deliberately lower than his opponent should have been, allowing for his duck and sidestep.

A grunt, choked on pain and gore, exploded beside his ear and he twisted, dropping the small blade to catch the older man's wrist as the sword continued its backward arc. Straightening his knees against resistance, Marc pulled the sword arm up, turning into his foe and driving the knife home with every ounce of bodyweight.

A bellow burst from his lips, tearing free from deep within. Roaring at the black night, he released the corpse into the darkness. Air stuttered and staggered into his lungs on a laugh or sobs that hinted at hysteria, and adrenaline coursed through him like fire. Shaking, clenched like a fist, he turned, scanning the ground for the figure of the girl.

Marella sprawled at his feet, clutching weakly at the rough gravel under her hands. He swept her up, pulling her frail softness against his skin, pushing his face into the knotted confusion of her hair, and he strode into the dark house.

Blood ran silently from a gash below his ribs, dark and wet and without pain. Laying her into the soft sanctuary of the bed, he turned and followed the rush of his blood to the fire by the river. Laughter that was beyond any thought beat his chest and strained in his throat.

Max lay beside his kill like a lion, fever glittering from his blood blacked face. The bitch crouched closer to the fire. Her head was down, a short hilt stuck from the side of her neck and she made no effort to turn toward her master as he approached. Her blood had stained the pale stones under her paws, and she stared a dry and endless vigil by the side of the fire. The horses grazed nearby as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Marc stood, staring at the red gauntlet of his own forearm, and concentrated on breathing. He flexed his fingers, his elbows, unclenched his jaw. Another bellow burned under his heart, and he fought it down, grimacing through the pain of denial. He blinked and shook red mists from his vision. He had to think.

The weapons he might need. He gathered them into a pile on a worn army blanket and scanned the area around the camp again. The horses he would take back with him. They, too, might be needed in the morning.

The bodies he would tend in the daylight. Now he had to see that Marella was unharmed. Gathering the line to lead the horses, swinging the haul of weapons over his back, he chose a burning stave from the fire and ordered the dog back to the hut.

[top]

CHAPTER FOUR.

Marella collapsed down into the bedding, her throat working over a lump that would not budge. Her head was filled with an emptiness so wide and deep its roaring echoes drowned out thought. Fear, pain and exhaustion gripped her and she trembled in their grasp. Shock sucked the blood from her face.

When Marc stepped through the doorway, she gasped. Her breath caught fire on her tongue and she whimpered, crawling back against the wall.

Darkness fled from him.

He filled the room, towering over where she huddled. The fire at his fingertips raised a sheen up his arms and over his face. He smelled of blood and sweat. Mania glittered in his pale eyes and his breath sawed the air like threats of violence.

Small sobs choked from her nose as she clutched at the blankets and pulled herself smaller, rolling into a tight ball. She closed her eyes and buried her face into her knees as weakness and desperation flared across her vision. Keening filled her chest, rising to a scream inside her head. A thin, broken whine escaped while moments dragged into a cold eternity.

The scrape of his footsteps over the rough floor carried like an alarm, and the bare skin of her shoulder ached with an expectation of his touch. He was male. Men were strength. Men were violence. They were rape.

Eddies swirled across her skin when he moved past, as terror, stark and frigid, heightened her senses to fever pitch. Shuddering against her knees, she heard the crack and snap of kindling catching in the hearth. Behind closed eyelids, the room lightened to shades of blood and the air she'd clamped in her chest leaked slowly into the night.

"Marella." The word was quiet, no more than a hoarse whisper, but it shocked through her again and she stuttered out a sob.

He was still by the fire. Her ears followed his tread to the couch, studied its creaks as he sat down.

"You're safe, now." He paused, let her listen to the words, let her hear what he said.

Even when she started to make sense of the sounds, her body had no faith in them. The crush of a strong arm still throbbed into the bruises at her throat. The scrape of coarse hair. Fetid breath and helplessness. Her body screamed in horror. Loss and hopeless grief tore at her heart. This man was no different. Violence and lust twisted together in the hard male smell of him. Blood and death and pain.

She wasn't safe. She could never feel safe again.

Grief rose into her chest like a tidal surge, stealing the air she craved and darkening the world around her. Wrapped in a tiny ball, hidden and frail and childlike, she sobbed away the strains that pulled and twisted at her insides. Tears forced their way from between clenched eyelids, washed down her cheeks and soaked the silk on her thighs. Hopelessly she surrendered to the waves of darkness.

When the sobbing finally exhausted itself, knots of air still hiccoughed into her chest.

The reek of blood was closer. The heat and weight of a body perched awkwardly beside her on the bed. A heavy hand rested between her shoulders and gentle fingers moved in slow circles over the nape of her neck.

Her eyes were thick and heavy and she felt as stiff as a corpse as she raised her head and turned her face to him. He'd made no move to harm her.

"It's all right," he said. "You don't have to move."

His fingers trailed softly down her spine as he lifted his hand and a chill caught on her skin where its warmth had rested. His eyes were bright with concern again, darker than before, but just as intensely focused on hers. “I’ll make you some tea.”

When he stood, the air was colder on her side.

He’d saved her life. Twice. He deserved better than disgust. He was a man, driven as all men were by power and lust and violence, but she felt his absence like a loss. When he moved away, other more obscure threats crowded against her.

When he sat again, holding the wooden mug with its handle toward her, she struggled to find some words, but she could manage no more than a sad shake of her head. For all the tears that had fallen, more burned just behind her eyes, and she filled her mouth with the bitter warmth of the tea and swallowed a little of the heartache.

He seemed to understand. “Just drink. You’re going to need that when you try to straighten out.”

She looked at him again. There was a small smile of reassurance and encouragement just behind the compassion in his eyes.

She nodded, noticing for the first time the cramped sweats that glued the silky fabric of her dress to the skin of her belly and thighs. She was crunched up so tight her back ached in its own silent dirge and her arm burned with the strain.

“The men,” he paused to note her reaction to the subject, then went on carefully, “they were mercenaries. Army veterans paid to bring us back to the city. The Druid wasn’t there.”

“Will others come, now?” She forced words over the glass in her throat, swallowing tea to ease their passing. Pain and danger were without end, and her body responded with adrenaline. Rigor shook through her to her teeth and her shoulders sagged, burning as if the muscles had torn. But this man had made no move to harm her.

“Not tonight. Tonight you can sleep without any fear. You need to rest.” A frown pinched his brow, his eyes sharpened and moved to the mug at her lips. “You don’t need to fear me. I’m not going to hurt you.”

“You’re a man.” The words snapped out before she could stop them, cold and cruel. It was hard to find trust. Blood and violence still stained the air around him.

He nodded, the soft skin around his eyes knotted in deep thought as he studied her grip on the mug. He raised both eyebrows and cocked his head to one side, searching out her eyes, and said, “So you hate men. I can’t argue against that, I’ve known some I didn’t like myself.

“I can guess at some of your reasons, but I need to know where I stand. I don’t want to wake up with a knife between my own ribs.”

Marella met his steady gaze with as much strength as she could muster. “Then tell me why you’ve done all this.” Tears and weakness wavered in the words. She was tired. If the world had been a kinder place, she might have had the courage to believe him, but as it was he was a man. A stranger. A Roman soldier. “No one risks everything for a stranger then asks nothing in return.”

“Would you prefer that I’d left you to the Druids?”

“That’s not an answer.” She was too tired for games, too broken and empty for lies and mistrust.

“It is.” The grin sparkled deep in his eyes and she glared harder at him. He was insane. “I couldn’t leave them to kill you. Then once you were here, you needed help. I made that my responsibility when I chose to step in and save your life.”

She drank a slow deep mouthful of tea and felt it work its warmth into the tight snags of muscle and sinew, felt it thickening her tongue and slowing her mind. “You take a good deal of delight in that responsibility, it seems to me. My father and his

whole family are warriors and proud of it. But I never saw any of them," she paused, searching the growing calm in her head for the right words, "- exalt? - in bloodshed."

His expression called her judgment harsh, but he didn't look away. "I wouldn't call it exalting in bloodshed. Or death. Or even in violence. I'd say this empire teaches boys to kill if they want to stay alive. The longer you stay alive, the better you get at stopping other men from killing you."

"I'd have said," she slurred, "you were looking for a fight when we came back. And when you found it, you were pleased. It looks to me like you were a soldier or a mercenary in your secret past. And you miss it."

He looked down at his hands. There was no denial in his answer. "Is it only soldiers you hate?"

"My brother is a soldier."

"Your brother is a man."

"A good man. A man of honour."

The look he shot at her suggested he had doubts on that score, but if he did, he kept them to himself. "There aren't many of those."

"No." Marella chased off the face that came to mind when she thought of dishonourable men. "But some, like the priest, don't pretend otherwise. The men who are dangerous are the ones who seem to be decent and turn out to be wolves."

"And that's where I fail, is it? I rescued you and assured you you're safe. That makes me a threat?"

"I'd feel better if I knew more about you." Not about his past, he was only a soldier, but about the pain he carried. She sighed. "You don't make sense to me. I never saw a soldier who cared about a woman. About pain. Or grief. The soldiers I know care about strength and violence. They care about other men, and power. Women they own or they use or they despise."

"Ah." He smiled more gently. "Then you should see Britannia. Our women fought beside us. If someone thought they could own or use my mother, they'd find themselves holding their own liver. All over the empire there are places where women hold themselves as the equal of their men."

"The empire." She managed a good wad of contempt and spat it at the floor. "Romans. Thieves and killers."

"One lot of killers instead of another. For two hundred years they've controlled this part of Hispania. Maybe it's time you gave thanks for the roads and the infrastructure you use and joined the rest of the colony. In the south and in the centre of the country, no one wastes energy on resisting the inevitable."

Her eyelids were growing heavier and her mouth growing numb, but she managed a sneer. "Roman!"

"No." The grin he had tried to suppress was spreading over his face again. "Even as we speak, my father's people are fighting them," he said. But the rest of that story belonged to the past he disclaimed.

As she tipped back the dregs of the mug, he put a hand out to take it from her. "Now. You have to try to straighten out." He stood back from the bed and watched her with his odd combination of concern and humour. Everything amused him, except for her pain. That, it seemed, he shared.

He held out a hand and she reached to take it, moaning as she forced her back straight and tried to twist her legs out from under her. His touch spread warmth from her fingertips that moved to trembling in her joints. There was reassurance in his strength, not threat, and it whispered to remind her of dreams long dead.

“Don’t try to stand up. Just straighten. Lay back, or onto your side and let the muscles stretch slowly or they’ll cramp.”

When she opened her eyes, she peered through a blur of tears at the black wash of blood that had soaked his shirt and down into the wool of his kilt. Trying to breathe through the worst of the pain, she took her hand from his, lay onto her back and pulled her knees up. Lacing her fingers over her aching abdomen, she closed her eyes and rode the seductive waves of *morphia*. Every aching part of her longed to surrender to the gentle wash of the poppy but she forced her eyes to open, her head to clear.

“You’re hurt,” she said.

Marc looked down, pulling the gash in the fabric open, nodding and peering at the injury as if he hadn’t noticed it before. “I need some hot water. So do you.”

He carried the kettle into the dark washroom, leaving her alone with her pain, and when he eventually returned, his chest was bare. The clean wound showed as a livid gash from above one hip, across his sun browned belly and up to his lower ribs.

He carried a bowl of vinegar and a pot of honey to the couch. Then from the trunk by the foot of the bed, he selected a long linen *tunica*, bit a nick at the hemline, and tore a long strip of cloth. And another. When he had shredded the garment, he moved back to the couch, sat facing the light of the fire and began to tend the wound.

Marella watched as he dipped a wad in vinegar and wiped it across the raw face of the injury. The muscles of his broad back clenched and he straightened, hissing curses. For long moments he sat, silent and still, then breathing deeply, he dipped another wad and repeated the torture.

She pulled herself out of her own fogs and suffering, struggled upright, and stumbled to the couch beside him. “Stop. Wait a minute. I can help.” Moving slowly, shaking her head to try to clear some of the opiate from behind her eyes, she knelt in front of the fire and concentrated on the line of pain on his skin.

Most of its length was barely skin deep, but where it skimmed his ribs, the blue substrate of bone showed between the clean lips of the wound. “Do you want to lay back?” she asked, dipping a clean wad of fabric into the strong acetum.

“No,” he said too sharply. “Just make sure it’s clean and I’ll wrap it with honey.”

Each time she wiped, the hard abdominal muscle clenched and his breathing sharpened above her. She waited until he relaxed and her eyes wandered up over the flat mass of his chest.

Dark blue lines covered one pectoral muscle, rose over his shoulder and ran away down his arm. Near her face a stag sprang, its antlers curved along its back, its feet pulled up under its belly. Twisting lines angled and curved around it and followed the form of his chest and arm, giving the impression the whole area was painted blue.

As she wiped one last time, she asked, “Is this part of the past you won’t own?”

His throat was tight when he answered. “It isn’t an easy thing to ignore. Or deny. That’s the whole point of it.” He took a deep breath and rubbed his left hand over the blue of his forearm. “There isn’t anything here to be ashamed of.”

She touched her fingertips to the outline of the deer, running them softly over the slightly raised line.

“You’d be surprised how many people do that.” He grinned, and she snatched her hand back, staring embarrassment up into his eyes. The ever-present laughter sparkled there, as crisp and clear as crystal. Fair stubble covered his chin and jaw, and where it crossed his cheek, ran into deep creases and a hollow that wanted to be a dimple. His lips were full; his nose was straight, with a tiny scar on the bridge, close to one eye.

“You hold the dressing in place,” she slurred, shaking her head again as if the fogs had confused her sense of propriety. “I’ll wrap the bandage.” She busied her numb,

spongy fingers with spooning honey over a folded linen strip while the heat and colour dropped from her cheeks and chest. Her fingers shook as she held it onto the gash, waiting while he smoothed its soothing length and held it still.

When it was wrapped, the cloth was stark white against the brown of his skin. The strip served to emphasize his narrow waist and hips, and the depth and width of his chest and shoulders. Carefully he bent and, taking her hands, pulled her gently to her feet.

"Thank you," he said.

Standing close, the warmth of his skin carried the smell of him through her peaceful morphic haze. There were no more threats here.

The memory of another man lingered just behind the mists. A familiar sense of abandonment re-awoke and crept through her, crawling over her skin like a chill. Tears she hadn't felt building spilled unexpectedly down her cheeks and she turned her face away from Marc, limping back to the bed.

When she sat, she was surprised to find him kneeling at her feet. Once again he took her foot, and slowly unlaced the ties of her sandal. "I'll mix you some warm water before you get any dopier." He smiled, and she nodded, not entirely certain what he was talking about.

Caught in the mists of memory, she ignored him as he moved around the hut.

Deep inside, she was pleading with the man she had loved. Begging. Once again she denied his words. Clung to his hand. Begged him to say he had changed his mind. That was the day she'd learned that no dreams ever came true. A woman could hope her love would be returned, but men never loved.

Her eyes had closed and she forced them open, dragged a deep breath into her sore body, and tried to focus again on the room around her. Marc offered her a hand to her feet and she looked at her own hand, willing it to rise up to his. She no longer had any strong connection to her extremities.

"Marella." His voice was always calm. Smooth and deep. She liked the accent, so she smiled.

"Stand up. I want to you to come and wash before you sleep. Come with me."

Yes. She wanted to get to the washroom. Holding the gentle strength of his hand, she stood beside him and let him lead her into the dark room behind the hearth.

"Are you all right? Can I leave you here?"

She smiled at him again and sighed. He was smiling. "Yes," she said. "I'm all right. I need a clean dress."

He stepped from the room, calling back, "I'll bring you a rug. You can choose something that fits tomorrow."

Marc chuckled as he found a small rug she could wrap herself in for the night. Dragging a hand down his face, he tried to clear the grin and berated himself half-heartedly for his amusement at her expense.

At the bottom of the trunk he found a pair of split leather *brecks*. Pulling them up his legs, he unclipped the kilt and let it fall. His blood had clotted thick and hard in the coarse fabric but it would wash. If they had time.

Faded areas on the crossover ties of his trousers showed an extra inch or two of waistline since he'd last worn this part of his uniform and he raised his eyebrows. Life beyond the Legion had left him softer.

Life had been softer. Gentler. Every day with Neria had been sunshine. She was light and love and laughter. His fingers touched the golden thread of her hair.

While they'd lived at his brother's villa in Toletum, they had lived like nobility. Luxuries he had never dreamed possible had been part of their daily routine, but in the

end he'd needed none of it. He'd been no more content there than here in the dry, rocky hillsides. So long as she filled his world with her love.

For seven months she had been gone and the world was empty, as devoid of purpose as a cracked bowl.

In reality, life with the Legion hadn't been endless excitement. More often than not it was a life of hard labour. There were more years of building: roads, forts, civil buildings, city walls, and trenches, than there had been of fighting. One toned the men for the other.

He'd forgotten the pain, too. He had involuntarily hunched forward, keeping the pressure off his wound and he put a hand on the clean wraps and winced. Tomorrow it would hurt even more.

Tomorrow they would have more to deal with than a shallow belly wound.

Quickly he scratched together a meal of bread and cheese and poured himself a mug of wine. Chewing at the sore swelling on his lip, he worked over possibilities and practicalities. He was deep in thought when Marella emerged from the dark doorway and shambled to a stool near where he sat.

He moved the tray of food closer, and she pulled the edges of her rug up tight against her throat. Firelight kissed her bare shoulders and his eyes traced the soft curves down her long throat.

Where the waves of her hair fell into the shadows behind her, vague threats hovered and he gritted his teeth irritably. Poppy tea had eased the stresses from her features and her face was calm. The corners of her full lips turned up in the slightest of smiles. Dark brows, arched and finely drawn, framed the dark depths of her eyes and her nose was long and straight. Fine nostrils flared slightly and a tiny mole on her lip held his gaze.

Tomorrow he would help her get back into Caesaraugusta, back to the people she trusted, and she would no longer be his responsibility. He made himself look away from her lips. Then he would have done all he could for her.

That wasn't true. It was far from true and he knew it. But none of it was his choice. He had no power to alter the outcome for her.

Sitting in front of him in the firelight's soft focus, her vulnerability clawed at his gut, demanding that he do something. There were parts of the puzzle she hadn't put together yet. Even the little she'd told him made it clear that the people she trusted had sold her up the river.

It wasn't his problem. But he couldn't stand by, again, and watch helplessly as the world crushed the life from another innocent soul.

"Can you think straight?" he asked, sure of the answer, anyway, but driven to try.

"Yes," she said, reaching one handed to smear soft cheese onto a small piece of bread. "Can I have a goblet of wine?"

"That's not a good idea," he said, then changed his mind and reached for a mug, pouring a small amount of wine for her. "You won't have any trouble sleeping, at least."

As she sipped and nibbled absently at her food, he tried to work his thoughts into a line she could follow. "I can take you into the city tomorrow. I have to leave here, for a while at least, so it doesn't make much difference to me where you want to get to. I'll be leaving the country, either north through Gaul or west to the coast." He paused, trying to judge whether his words were making sense.

"So, you see it doesn't matter to me where you want to go. I can take you to the temple or to your brother's home."

Her nod complicated his expression. It annoyed him, like she'd jumped to a conclusion without caring enough to hear all the facts. He opened his fingers, pushing his palm flat against the table and asked, "Are you sure you'll be safe?"

Her gaze had a strangely unfocused vehemence. "Of course. When I tell Taran how the High Priest did this, how he lied...." Her voice trailed off as her thoughts drifted inward.

"Are you sure?"

She closed and reopened her eyes slowly, forcing as much clarity into her words as she could find. "Why do you doubt it?"

All her movements were imprecise. When she blinked, it took strength to make her eyelids open. Her tongue was thick with the strength of the drug. And still she had a sharpness of thought that held her steady.

She could make up her own mind. She knew her circumstances, and her brother, better than he did. Tearing his eyes from hers, he rubbed his fingers over the roughness of his chin and shook his head at his own confusion. Uncertain whether to go on, he said, "Eat. You need to eat more."

It wasn't his decision to make. Her choices weren't his problem. He had no business pushing any further into her life. He had fears and motives of his own that he didn't want to acknowledge or face. Interference would do nothing more than complicate her already precarious situation. And damn him into the bargain.

Past failures and ineffectuality raged in his chest and made him say, "Why didn't your brother know you were drugged?"

She opened her mouth to reply, then snapped it shut and he poured his own thoughts on the matter out onto the table. "He's a commander of troops. He must know as much as I do about sleep drugs. If I could see what had happened as soon as you told the story, why didn't he? Or did he? Does he have any reason to want you dead?"

That was too far. He saw the words hit her like a blow and her eyes flew wide and filled with tears. Hauling the trembling mug of wine to her lips, she washed away a mouthful of food and pressed her fingers over her own mouth.

Clutching her rug, she backed away, staring, not at Marc, but at the table. She flicked a final horrified glance at him, then climbed onto the bed and buried her silent pain under the covers.

Marc tapped his fist thoughtfully on the table. That was a raw nerve. There was more in this than family honour and a depraved priest. But it was her decision, not his.

Pouring more wine into his bowl, he sopped honeyed bread absently and chewed over his frustration. His son was safe. From this point on, he could move in any direction he wanted to.

All up, he was facing the local priesthood and whatever forces they could rally, an insulted Celtiberian Duke and his soldiers, and, if he came to their attention, the whole Roman army. He was already damned. Fatigue made his hand rough as he pulled the grin from his face.

It didn't work.

Quiet laughter rumbled deep in his chest. It didn't make much difference if she wanted his protection or not. He wasn't likely to live long enough to matter. It hurt more when he laughed. Holding a hand over his belly, he laughed anyway and moved to the couch to sleep.

[top]

CHAPTER FIVE.

Suelta hovered, silent and stiff, just beside the curtain. Pressed close to the wall, she ensured her shadow couldn't darken the doorway while she listened to the priest spinning his poison. Fury seethed in her belly and she pressed a clawed hand into her own flesh to keep from cursing out loud. Lying bastard. Monstrous, craven coward.

"I thought they would be here by now," Leucetius purred, crowding his words with regret and consolation. "Still, if the peasant hasn't returned to his house, we can expect them to take longer to find him. One of my men will bring a report direct to you sometime tonight. The mercenaries believe he's gone for good."

"And if he doesn't return? If he fled with my sister? What then?" Taran chewed thick wads of outrage. Suelta could hear the violence in his tread as he paced the room. Threats of retribution echoed against the cold stone walls.

"The rumours make him a Roman deserter or a Teutonic hero. Either way, let Rome deal with him." The voice was so thick with syrup it made her want to puke just listening. "I'll give the commander at the barracks here his description. He won't be hard to place. Rome has a way of dealing with its own."

"And my sister?" His words were mumbled, little more than a breath forced over apoplexy.

Leucetius sighed. His pause was too long and Suelta strained into the silence, willing him to give her some sort of hope. "I just can't see how she could be alive." He wasn't certain. He spoke too softly and too slowly. He was still wrestling possibilities and his reluctance clumped thickly on his tongue.

"Her body wasn't there anywhere, I saw that for myself. But the current in both rivers is strong. And there are wolf packs all over the hills. If he pulled her from the water, and if she was still breathing, she would be too weak to travel, too weak to run.

"There was no sign of her at the hut. And when it was abandoned, he left so hastily he left food and weapons behind." He paused too long again, adding at length, "I think he exposed himself, even though he failed to save her, and now he is running for his life."

"But you don't know. You can't know for sure." Congestion coloured Taran's words black and Suelta could hold herself out of the room no longer.

"Why are you listening to this, Taran?" she demanded. "You have no way of knowing who this man is or why he was there. Maybe he's no more than a stranger who objected to a murder."

Leucetius' breath hissed through his teeth and his mouth twisted, but he said no more. His steely gaze was fixed on Taran, pointedly ignoring a woman who didn't know enough to be silent.

She ignored him just as determinedly, pouring the desperate heat of her plea into her husband's eyes. "Two days ago he was sure she had a Roman lover. Sure enough to demand her death."

Without addressing her directly, Leucetius flagged his hand dismissively. "It's of no consequence to me who she whores for. The fact is, she broke the most solemn vow a woman can make. She consecrated herself to perpetual virginity. That law isn't my choice; the Goddess Diana herself decrees it.

"And Taran," he dropped his eyes respectfully, "it's your family who has to bear the possibility, the probability, that he was Roman. That much is your shame, not mine."

Taran returned his wife's glare, his eyes swelling from his face with outrage. "Don't you raise your voice to me when I am in conference, woman." Spittle sprayed from his lips, and he sucked savage breaths, but his voice dropped to a dangerous hiss. "You will be silent."

Her heart quailed. There was no idle threat in her husband. Taking this stand had embarrassed him. Again. With hands tangling uselessly in the fabric of her gown, she shook her head slightly and forced herself to go on. "She accused him, Taran." She flicked one nervous glance at the priest and touched her tongue to her lips. Her throat was suddenly dry, but she had passed the point where she could hope to withdraw. "If the goddess has spared her life, dearest, it might be because she's been wronged. Look at him." Terror pulled her face back to the still, silent predator that sat across from her. "He makes my skin crawl. If Marella insists it was him, Taran, give her another hearing."

"If she's alive." The words were a threat. Leucetius resolutely refused to look at the woman as he hissed, "If she's still in the country and not halfway across the mountains with her lover." He stood to face Taran, using his height to gain an air of moral superiority. "And if she speaks against me again, or if anyone else speaks her slanders for her, I will be forced to deal with her insults myself."

No one could doubt his intention. He had no fear of the *dux* or his power, or his army or his family honour.

Suelta took a step back. He should fear. He was only a man after all; he had no great number of men at his disposal if Taran or any other layman wanted to silence him. She turned her confusion back to her husband. Ire still steamed around him, his hands worked at his sides, but his gazed was fixed on consequences she could not see.

What gave the priest the bald faced gall to threaten her before her husband, in her own home? And what stopped her husband from opening his chest for the vultures to feed on his black heart?

An unnatural winter threatened the air as she stormed from the room. Its cold breath raised gooseflesh on her shoulders and arms as a rash of heat rushed over her cheeks. It didn't bear consideration.

Fires couldn't push the darkness from her room or the chill from her skin. Rubbing her arms, she crouched on the edge of a chair in front of the hearth, aching to roll up tight around the ice in her belly.

When he came to her room, Taran had given up none of his clenched fury. As he strode to stand in front of her, he was shaking his head, biting down on words he couldn't force from his mouth.

"He's going back to Okilis in the morning to prepare for *Samhain*," he spat, as if it was an accusation.

Good. But Suelta had nowhere near enough courage to speak the word aloud. She studied his rage, watched the clench of his jaw as he worked to swallow bile.

"You don't ever humiliate me like that. Not ever. Never in front of him."

"Taran." She tried to keep her voice level, to force calm over his temper and soothe him. "What does he know? What is making you stoop before him?"

"None of your business. Keep out of things you can't understand."

"What is it?" She stood, slipping a hand onto his forearm, trying to make him face her.

His arm flicked from under her touch, drawing back, and she closed her eyes, turning to avoid the worst of the blow.

When it didn't come, she flinched and opened her eyes to see his hand frozen at the top of his swing. He shook, his mouth twisting in silent wrath. The hand dropped to

her shoulder, his grip grinding bones together. She stifled a whimper, turning under the pressure as he shoved her closer to the bed.

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Marella woke with a jolt of panic, as though she'd fallen from storm tossed heights, and gasped over her pounding heart and panting breath. She grabbed at the covers, snatching them up to her throat as she scanned the room for danger.

From the couch Marc watched her in silence, his clear blue eyes shining in the shadows of early morning. He lay on his side, curled slightly over the soreness on his stomach, his arms crossed against the chill on his bare chest. For a few moments he watched her watching him, then he smiled and scratched his scalp, using his fingers to comb back the thick mass of hair.

Tentative fingers went to her own hair. Her scalp itched, and her fingers jammed in the tangles where it had knotted over dry blood. She needed a bath. In the washroom she'd seen a basin, a yard or so across and about knee deep. "Marc," she said, whispering in the quiet of the morning.

"Good morning." He hadn't moved, just lay staring with his hands locked behind his head.

"Is it?" She couldn't match his smile. "Is it possible to have a bath? Can we heat some water?"

He nodded and raised a finger to touch a swelling on his lower lip. "We can heat some water." He groaned as he swung his feet to the floor and pulled himself up to sit. "I'll go down and get some. While you bathe, I need to go and bury the men out there."

Her lip curled in distaste. "Why?" It seemed a waste of energy for men who would have killed them both for a few coins.

"Respect. They're soldiers. I would never leave a man unburied if it could be helped."

Before she could raise any further objection, he asked, "Do you still want to go back to Caesaraugusta today?"

It wasn't a question she wanted to answer. She didn't want to think about it, but there was no way to avoid the issue. And she had no idea how much time they had to make the decision. His questions had worked their way through her dreams and nightmares. And her answers were nightmares in themselves. "How long do I have to think about that?" she asked as calmly as she could.

Even thinking about her options set her heartbeat racing again. For a little while she had hoped she might be able to survive, to get justice. Realizations in the night meant she could no longer believe that. There were too many men with too much to lose if she lived. "*Saragossa*," she deliberately corrupted the pronunciation away from the Latin as all local Celts did, "might be more dangerous than I thought."

She watched his face for signs of ridicule, but his gaze was as calm and steady as always. More confidently she ventured, "I'm not sure I know where I can go."

"Okay." He stood up, stretched gingerly and groaned a curse on mortality. "First, water. Then while that heats, you can eat. Then while I go down and do this," he pointed at the wall, toward the riverbank below, "you can think it all through."

As she dipped bread and honey into her bowl of strong sour wine, Marella watched her peasant eat. Nothing in his movement suggested any degree of self-consciousness. In fact, in every way he radiated calm confidence. But there was a limit to that, too.

Her brother, and their father before him, had confidence that slurred easily into arrogance and indignation. Life had keyed her senses to respond to the flare of an eye or the clench of a fist. Fast reflexes meant the difference between abuse and injury. The

men in her life were gods of their own kingdoms. Noble, autocratic. No one, certainly no woman, dared challenge their hand. No woman mattered that much.

Without conscious intent, she turned to look at the closed trunk of clothes. If his wife was higher born, a noblewoman, that would explain the finery. It wouldn't explain the house or the sheep. If she had given up wealth and position, what had he given up for her? "Where is your wife?"

Surprise bled into sadness and loss in the time it took to meet her eyes and look away. Before she could apologize, he answered, "She died."

Dead, and the child was only three or four. "Recently?"

He raised his face to hers. Pain caught in his features, but there was no suggestion of anger or refusal. "A bit over seven months ago."

Marella hugged the blanket tighter under her arms as she tried to pick a way through the questions she needed answered. "Her clothes," she paused, shaking her head slightly and nodding toward the trunk, "they're not the clothes of a shepherdess."

Questions hung between them, unspoken, and she hoped he would find a way to take them from her. He offered nothing. "No."

"Only someone very wealthy would own clothes like that. Only a noblewoman would have any reason to dress so extravagantly. It doesn't fit with living here."

He stirred porridge absently for a moment, seeming to assess how much he could afford to share. "We didn't always live here." He wasn't rushing to tell his story, but neither was he warning her away from the subject.

Holding herself steady on the edge of the table, she pushed him further. "You haven't lived here very long, that much I can see. But where did you come from and why? Was there a scandal?"

A smile moved one side of his mouth. "No. No scandal. My past caught up with us, that's all. We needed somewhere a bit out of the way."

"Hispania isn't 'a bit out of the way', not from Britannia."

"No. We lived on an estate south of here for a few years with my brother and his wife."

"Your brother is wealthy? Noble?"

He turned to stand, lifted a mug of warm honeyed wine to his mouth and said, "I understand why you feel that you need to know more about my past. But the truth is, there's nothing that will make any difference to you. I'm happy to help you if I can, but in a few days you'll be back with the people you know and trust. And nothing about me will matter."

Taking the kettle down, he walked into the washroom, emerging with the empty kettle and returning to finish the dregs of his wine. "My wife died in childbirth. Yes, I was a soldier. No, no one in my family has any noble blood that I know of. Yes my brother is wealthy. Very wealthy."

He spread his hands and shrugged. "His wife is Roman, if that matters to you. She's," he moved his hand to suggest a balance and grinned, "a bit noble. Her family is."

He was right. Nothing in all that made any difference. It went to explain some of the weight in his bearing. It explained some of why he was here, and why he seemed restless and pained. It explained his skill with a knife. None of the past he would share answered what kind of man he was. He appeared to be honourable and kind, but appearances were deceptive. Honourable men didn't need to run from their past.

She tried for his future. "What will you do now?" He couldn't go back to sitting on the hillsides with his sheep. The whole area had become dangerous, and he was too

striking to hide in the hills for very long. "Once I'm gone, you and the boy will have to leave here."

He shrugged again, but this time there was no humour in it. The mountains leaned on his shoulders again. Stabs of guilt made Marella turn away. He had lost the safe place he'd carved for his family when he rescued her. And for what? He had traded his safety for hers, and now it looked as if she had none for herself.

"There's always work for a sword arm. In security. Or mercenary armies at the frontiers. With or against Rome, it makes little difference in the end."

"In the end?" she echoed.

He looked at her again and smiled. There was a hint of regret in his eyes, but he turned and walked into the washroom. With hands full of digging tools, he cocked an eyebrow and his grin cleared and widened when he stepped back into the sunlight. "I don't much like hiding, and some deaths are better than others."

Alone in the house, she rubbed her hands together as if she needed the warmth. It was too much to take in. He really had no intention of making demands on her. If he'd lost everything, it seemed he was content with that. Maybe even glad. Maybe saving her life had given him the chance to throw off the weight of a life grown too heavy.

The smell of him filled the hut. The blanket she pulled around herself, the pillows she had slept on, everything was scented, and every breath was a wash that painted images in her mind. When she closed her eyes she could see her fingertips brushing over blue tracings on hard tanned muscle. Her fingers burned with the memory, as if they still pressed on the heat of his skin.

She snapped herself upright. There was foolishness in wandering down that path. His eyes were too blue, too clear, too bright. They shone with laughter too readily and darkened with compassion too intensely. He was a soldier, with a past he had to run from. In the end he was a peasant, and there was no point lingering over the kindness he'd shown or the tenderness of his hands.

In the end, as he said, nothing about him would matter. Her future was as grim as his unless she could find a way past threats she couldn't even see.

Kneeling at the trunk, she rifled through and held up a Grecian *peplos*. White and gathered on a tie under the bust, she held it across her front and judged it suitable. The fabric ran like water over her hand. Down each side was a narrow purple and gold strip of embroidery and pressing the gilded lines left the fabric bent. Gold thread.

Not even Suelta wore anything to compare to these treasures packed away in a shepherd's hut. They would cost more than he could hope to earn in a year, and yet he had no concern over whether she wore them or not. How wealthy did a man have to be before he had no interest in the value of the things he owned?

In the washroom, water in the tub had been mixed so hot she had to step in slowly, lowering herself against the bite. Beside her were a rough linen cloth and a block of the sweetest soap she had ever smelled. She was used to tallow cakes, thick and greasy and unscented. This was translucent and smelled of lavender.

He had lived a life more genteel than her own in this hut with his wife and someone else's bastard. Her hand went to her abdomen and she frowned at her own callous assumption. There were circumstances and children outside everyday explanations, she knew that well enough herself.

There was no beginning to understand him. He was strange. No man she knew would make the choices he had. No man she had ever known had made such extravagant allowances for a stranger. Especially a woman.

The men she knew. Her own brother. Taran knew the priest had drugged her. He had handed her over to the judgment of the Druids knowing she had done no wrong.

She hadn't seen it before. But now she did, it came as no surprise. It cut deep in her heart. It stabbed and bled in her soul, but it was not a shock. She had shamed him in her refusal to marry Sarnicio's nephew. That she knew as well as everybody else, and she knew she'd taken a grave risk when she took her vows to escape the marriage.

But he had seemed to accept it. He had seemed to find enough balance to accept her choice and let her be.

So, what if he had learned more about the choices she'd made? What if he had learned her reason for fleeing from the marriage they'd arranged to the goddess' temple? That would be a shame he could never overlook. That would be something he would kill her for, himself. Or hand her back to the Druid to do his dirty work for him.

If she went to the Temple of Diana, the priestesses would hand her over to Leucetius. As long as he was alive, she was as good as dead.

Taran had already handed her to the priest once. If she went to him again, and he did know more about her choices than she thought, she was again as good as dead.

That left her one choice. She could go to Sarnicio in Numantia. If he refused her, she would be handed back to Taran. But if he would listen to her, if she could convince him to hear her, he would be the one man who could keep her alive. He was head of the Arevaci people, *princep* of the whole autonomous region; even Taran had to defer to him. And she'd lived at his *casa* for five years.

Marc worked against the hard ground, clawing a hole deep enough to lay the fallen. They would have to share their bed, but he faced them to the rising sun and laid a rock at their feet. He didn't spare them weapons, but if they made it to Elysium they wouldn't need to fight any more.

The dog, he laid in her own shallower grave, piled with stones to keep the scavengers from her. He took the time to break up the campsite and scatter any stones that showed signs of gore.

Exertions tore his wound and blood seeped through the bindings over his belly, but he paid them no heed. Looking around at the scrubby tussocks and brushy saplings along the bank, he had no sense of loss or longing. The hills had never felt like home, and his love had left too soon to engrave her face on any part of the featureless grey and green.

The boy he would miss. If he had the choice he would have ridden his son south, back to the villa, and left him with family. But Bastien and his wife would do the boy well enough. Better than he could for now.

When he was sure he'd done enough for the dead soldiers, he trudged up the bank for the last time. He had no desire to look back.

Outside the door, Marc slapped the wall and called, giving fair warning before he entered. As he stepped into the shade, his heart came up into his throat and a sound too much like a sob caught his breath.

The smell hit him like a fist, breaking open soft, barely formed scars. He caught the doorjamb at shoulder height, clamping his jaw and locking his knees. Standing silently, he took a moment to let his breath come back. Perfumed soap whispered to him from the memory of Neria's skin, and his heart still struggled to tell the difference between hope and memory.

Marella sat at the table, shadows draped over her like a veil of confusion. She was afraid. Again. Watching him as if she might need to duck for cover at any moment.

His face set in grim lines, but he managed to move from the white glare to the softer light near the hearth, keeping his back to her. Letting grief settle back into its familiar ruts, he packed wood in to raise the fire and lowered the kettle on its chain.

When he could, he turned. "How are you feeling? Do you think you can travel?"

“I think so,” she answered in a bare whisper. “I...” She stopped, stood and then sat down at the table again. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No.” Without meeting her eyes, he turned and walked into the washroom.

Beside the basin, the cake of soap sat where he’d left it and he lifted it to his lip and quietly breathed the sweet lavender perfume.

Sighing, he swallowed the bitter gall of frustration at things he couldn’t change. He replaced the block on the damp folded cloth, lifted the basin to pour away the used water, and shrugged away obdurate fates.

As soon as the kettle boiled he would have a bath himself. It might be the last time he’d get a chance in a long while.

[top]

CHAPTER SIX.

There was something vaguely uncomfortable about touching the soft skin of his belly and it kept her eyes down, studying her own fingers as she smoothed the clean white linen strips. All the while she worked, his concentrated scrutiny burned in her cheeks. It nudged her heartbeat faster. It made her breath short and her fingers tremble like a guilty secret just about to be exposed.

“All done,” she said, stepping back to meet his eyes.

Tension that hummed like enthusiasm shone there and he grinned at her. “Take anything you can use,” he said, pointing at the trunk, but then moving his hand around to encompass everything in the house.

“Whatever can be packed on the horse, we’ll take. Even if he has to struggle, once we get the wagon it’ll all balance out.” He strode intently around the room tossing things into small piles of clothes, cooking utensils and bedding. “Numantia is a long way. Seven days of good travel. Any trouble along the way and it’ll take even longer, so believe me, you’ll be glad of every small luxury you can get.”

He was anxious to leave. Through the morning she had seen his choices settle into certainties. As he’d explained, a neighbour owned a small open *carra*. He would leave his stock, his dog, and two of the three saddle horses in exchange for the wagon and its team. With luck they would pick up a trade caravan moving between the cities and the journey would be more secure.

“Eat. And drink more wine,” he said, and she moved quickly to comply. “The last few poppy pods we had I used to steep the wine a little. It will make riding just a little easier on you.”

“Thank you.” It didn’t seem enough to say. She could have made a list of reasons to thank this stranger. “Will travelling so far change the plans you’ve made for yourself?” It was almost ‘sorry’. When she had asked him to take her to the Celtiberian capital, he’d barely blinked.

“No. Clarified them, that’s all.” He knelt to wrap a pile of belongings in bedding and began to tie the wad with cord. “I’ll go north from Numantia, up to the coast. I think I need to go home for a while.” He chuckled half under his breath. “I’m tired of all this warmth and sunshine.”

Marella watched the way he moved. His short linen tunic was sleeveless and it pulled tight across his back when he reached. Heavy muscle bunched and corded in his arms, his thighs strained the suede of his trousers.

Cavalry, she assured herself. Everywhere, it seemed, horsemen wore leggings under or instead of tunics or kilts. When he walked to the washroom and back, she had no more doubts.

He carried a brass and leather *cingulum*. The smaller scabbard on its crossed bands was empty, but dragging on the second strap was a heavy broad-bladed sword. He drew the blade and checked its edge, shaking his head in self-admonishment, then slid it home and dropped the sword belt to the pile on the bed.

On the table beside her was a selection of small knives, and he checked each one as he slid them into seemingly endless niches on his hips and legs. She sipped her wine as they disappeared.

"Are you anticipating trouble?" She smiled herself as she heard the question, and he laughed out loud.

"I am," he answered. "On one hand, the end of October is a good time to be travelling. It's not too hot. Lots of people are moving. The campaign season has finished and soldiers from all over the empire are travelling, looking for somewhere warm to spend the winter getting drunk.

"On the other, your Druid will be wondering where his report is by now. Your brother will be gathering a welcoming committee somewhere in Caesaraugusta. And, if we get past those two, those soldiers from all over the empire are travelling. I like to try to keep some distance between me and them." He raised his eyebrows like he was setting the ante, then added, "There's one in particular I don't want to see. And he has every reason under the sun to be wandering through Hispania right now."

She held her face in her hands. He was right. Numantia might only be a few days travel away, but it might as well be on the other side of the world.

As he turned from the table, she stood to face him. Standing close, she looked up to his face. He'd shaved and the smooth skin of his cheek smelled clean. Fingers that twitched nervously at her side rose to touch the softness near his ear. "You're a good man," she said, struggling to find precise meanings in unfamiliar words. "I will find a way to repay all the things you've done for me. I don't know how," or if she would survive, "but if I can, I will find a way."

"There's an easy way you can do that." He cocked an eyebrow and smiled, so she took a step back and brought her hands up defensively. His smile flicked over her sudden apprehension and brightened as he said, "Stop flinching every time I move. And stop ducking like you think I'm going to hit you. If you want to thank me, believe me when I say I won't hurt you."

Laughter glittered in his eyes so that she wanted to laugh with him, despite the fears that clamoured in her chest. Her heartbeat raced over the embarrassment and relief left in the wake of those unspoken assumptions, and confused emotions strained across her brow, but the corners of her mouth trembled toward a smile.

"Where do you come from?" She hadn't meant to speak the words aloud and she shook her head, trying to deny them. Maybe there was a place in the world that was safe. A place where men had gentle hands and laughing eyes. Where they had the courage to follow love or to meet death with equanimity.

"Another world," he said. "And now I'm going back." Shouldering one of the packs of belongings, he gathered a handful of other bits and turned to the door. "Are you coming?"

His smile underlined the ambiguity of his words and she felt her knees jar unreliably as she picked up the food pack and followed him into the sunlight.

The horses were saddled and he took time, carefully weighing each bag as he loaded one heavily. Whatever could go on one of the riding horses he left to one side, whistling tunelessly to himself as he worked.

As he moved back and forth from the house to the horses, his gaze focused on things Marella couldn't see. He was deep in thought, calculating or evaluating alternatives and she kept her thoughts to herself, not wanting to disturb him.

When he approached her with a water skin full of wine and held it out for her, it looked like he was planning a holiday trip to the coast. "I know this is going to be uncomfortable," he said. A small frown knotted over his eyes, but he seemed to trust her to carry her share of discomfort with good grace. "We'll take it very slow and easy. It won't take more than half an hour to get there, then you can sit in the wagon. I can open up bedding if you need to lie down then, but this ride is unavoidable." He looked up at the sun. "And I don't want to be here any longer than absolutely necessary. Someone will be back here looking around by noon, so if you think you're ready, let's move."

She walked to the doorway and peered into the cool shadow of the house. It was bare, soulless, like a like a cup emptied of ambrosia. Dragging resolution into her chest on a sigh, she walked to the horse and waited for help to mount. "I'm ready, I think," she said. "I'll leave it all to the goddess. She will see that justice is done. Even if we don't make it, she will hold an accounting."

Marc waited while she wriggled her hips and tried to find a comfortable way to sit on the hard leather seat. "It won't do us much good if we're dead though, will it?"

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Marella groaned. Horses were her brother's love, never hers. Her bruises alone were enough to wear at her reserves of strength, but this wide gangling animal, with its jarring step and occasional stumble, jolted and jostled her to breaking point. Her bottom ached. Her thighs were cramped and her back burned with tension.

As if he'd heard her displeasure spoken aloud or read it in her silence, Marc called from behind, "It isn't far now."

She didn't want to look at his face. Every time he looked at her, he seemed to read her secrets and she could hear his quiet laughter.

The dog kept the small flock of sheep together on the rough path ahead, and Marc rode with the packhorse behind her. She felt like a farmer's wife, bitter and eroded by poverty. Or at least, like a farmer's wife would feel if she was stuck on a horse in the middle of the day.

Her mood lightened a little once she was in the comparative luxury of the wagon, sitting on the padded seat, with Marc beside her, driving. The sparkling white of her dress seemed a poor choice already, with small scuffs showing clearly in the fine fabric. The beaded shawl she'd wrapped over her hair and shoulders cast rainbow droplets of light on the tired wood of the *carra*, and she swallowed complaints as she reached for the wineskin. She drank and handed it over to him.

Ahead, the bridge over the Iberus stood stark against the pale rush of the river, and he wiped his mouth as he handed the wine back, saying, "I want you to take the shawl off and wrap up in an old blanket. You can sit here or lie down behind the seat, but not dressed like that."

Marella looked at the pretty fabric with its bright beads and fine embroidery. "Is it hard for you to see these clothes on someone else?" she asked self-consciously, as she slipped the shawl from her shoulders and folded it onto her lap.

"Aye. It is," he said. "But that's not the problem. We're going to cross the bridge and move through *Saragossa*." He grinned at the inflection. "No one is even going to bat an eyelid unless you look like the Queen of the Nile herself."

She shot him a look that made comment enough and he laughed. "In fact," he leaned forward and touched the floor by his feet. Before she could dodge it, he wiped a smudge down her cheek and onto her chin, "you need to look less like a Queen and more like a peasant."

"That," she answered archly, "is not possible."

Behind her in the open *carra,* a wad of the bedding had been opened and she lifted a small rug from the pile. It was the same one she'd slept in and the smell of it caught briefly on her tongue. As she adjusted it over her head, she turned her face into its softness and breathed it in. It was a small security, like an infant who clings to a comforter, but it smelled safe. For all the threats ahead, there was safety in the images it stirred.

Marc had draped a muted earth-coloured cloak over his own shoulders, covering the glaring noise of the woad. Without effort, they transformed into part of the invisible wash of humanity moving through the city. Neither Roman nor Lusone took one blind bit of notice as the cart made its way down through the merchant centre and across the township toward the gates in the western wall.

"Keep your ears open." Marc leaned closer, whispering against her cheek as they passed through the market area. "We need a caravan, any merchant trade. And listen up for troop movements. Any men from this garrison who plan to move down the roads could be on the lookout for us."

"I won't understand them." Marella found a smile and chuffed herself with a small victory. "They're only Romans."

He grinned back. "They're not, m'lady, and you should know that. The Fourteenth and the Seventh are both Hispanic Legions. Surely a daughter of the Warrior Elite doesn't need a lecture on pedigree." He touched his forehead in deference and she laughed.

"If they wear that uniform, they defend Rome."

"If they wear that uniform, they defend you, too. And your lands and your crops. And when they're not fighting for you," he raised his eyebrows, "or against you, they're building the roads and the bridges over the million rivers in this valley."

She turned away to watch the city pass. He could hold his own beliefs on that score. She had no interest in justifications, and he seemed to be warming to his theme.

Glancing down the road toward the temple, she swallowed a breath that froze in her throat and clutched his forearm. "Marc." She dragged the blanket forward over her face and hunched down against his side. "Leucetius," she hissed. "The High Priest. There, on horseback."

Three men rode an easy jog up the cobbled side street towards them, the leader wearing a heavy black robe with its wide cowl pulled forward over his face. As they neared the wagon, Marc slowed the mules. Easing them to the side of the thoroughfare, he forced the riders to fall in behind or to move along their length in single file.

Marella watched her feet and held her breath as the riders passed with mumbled abuse. Too afraid to look at them, she turned her face to watch Marc. She could feel the tension in his side where she huddled against him, but his hands on the reins were open and relaxed. From under the clench of his brow he watched them, chewing silently on his bottom lip.

In the bright sunlight, concentration brought his pupils to pinpoints and his pale eyes shone at the riders like an omen. The soft skin under them tightened, sharpening his glare even more, and for the first time since she'd met him he looked dangerous.

The feeling it gave her crawled over her skin and she turned to follow his stare. Watching the riders move into the distance, her fear melted and warmed in her stomach as a realization struck her. She was beside him, safe, and that look of cold focused malice was trained on the men who would harm her.

Leucetius and his escort moved purposefully through the milling crowds toward the city walls. Where ever they were heading, they were travelling the same road. When Marc faced her, his shrill gaze was focused past her and his voice was quiet, as if he was speaking as much to himself. "Any idea where they're going?"

"His temple is in Okilis. He'll be ahead of us until our road turns north at Bilbilis."

"The men with him, they weren't veterans and they weren't Druids. Did you recognize anything about them?"

"Yes." The word bled from her mouth. There was no longer any reason to hold out a hope that Taran might reconsider her death sentence. "They're *equites*. Two of my brother's cavalry elite. They're not soldiers." She struggled to find a precise explanation. "Those gold torcs at their throats show their rank. They're commanders, generals."

Marc let a long breath whistle through his teeth. So, her brother was taking no chances with the priest's journey home. Three men, mounted. If they were in a hurry they could clear the distance to Bilbilis in two days. Certainly, they could move faster each day if they needed to. But the roads here or in Britannia or in Italia itself were designed the same way in every case. Way stations, towns or forts, at very least roadhouses with stables and hot food, were built every six or seven leagues. An easy day's travel for loaded wagons or men on foot.

If the riders left Caesaraugusta ahead of them today, they would be in each town ahead of them every night.

Marc formed a fist and tapped his thigh lightly, weighing poor choices against poorer. Together, he and Marella were too distinctive to disappear. If they travelled with traders, every night they would be a hot topic at taverns. Without a caravan, they had no cover from the threat of bandits or recognition by a nosy, bored or drunk centurion.

"Is there anywhere in this city we can stay tonight? If we can give them a day, they'll be far enough ahead to risk following."

Marella's eyes registered stark terror. Her dark lips parted, as though the air she was breathing was too thick, but she blinked rapidly, trying to make herself think. She peered at his chest, shaking her head as her thoughts raced from one possibility to the next.

"Nowhere. I would be recognized by every second person who lives here." She looked up with apologies in her eyes. "And Taran might already have men looking for you. Not might, he will." Warm fingertips still pressed on his forearm, and she looked away from his face. "Even if we went to an inn in the market precinct, chances are we'd be recognized."

"Then let's try the lion's den. How much do you trust your sister-in-law?"

Her breath wheezed over her fear, close enough to break in warm gusts over his cheek, and her brown eyes were dark and pleading. "Not that much. I don't trust anyone that much."

Desperate chances bubbled in his chest, forcing a grin over his mouth and laughter up into his eyes. Adrenaline was his drug of choice, and it loved chances. "How would we find her if she was the only choice?"

“She’s not. Surely there’s something else we can do.” She grasped at straws and her nails bit into his flesh. “We can leave the city and camp beside the road.”

“Outside a city this size? It draws in desperate people from all over the province. And those who are too dangerous or too desperate to be allowed inside the city, where do you think they end up? They live in the fringes, picking off the lost and the isolated.”

He shook his head and tried to look reassuring. “I need to know, honestly, is there a chance she’ll listen? Because if we leave here tonight, we’ll be dead by morning. I want to know if we’re definitely dead, or if we’ve got a fighting chance?”

Her eyes centred on his chest again and her fear slowly softened into resignation. When she shrugged and looked up into his face, he almost hugged her. “Follow the next road down toward the river.” Her hands were white on her lap, balling all her fears into a manageable handful.

As he pulled the mules back into the road, her courage had started ticking through the possibilities. “Taran will be in the conference hall from noon,” she paused and a light like hope filled her eyes, “or he’s over the river looking for you. He’s never going to believe we’d come back this way. He’ll chase ghosts up toward the mountains for a while at least. And he’ll take the rest of his *equites* with him. Which way would you have gone if you’d run?”

Marc let the rumbling in his chest grow into a gravelly laugh. “Good girl. Now you’ve got the idea.” He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her close, kissing her softly on the temple. “I’d have followed the valley north, right up to the foot of the mountains then west to Pompaelo and through to the coast.”

She was stiff in his grasp and he looked down at where she watched her hands in silence. Shock slapped his arm from her shoulders and he turned to face her. Her expression stopped his apologies. If she knew he was there at all, he couldn’t see the recognition. “If we can get to the rear of the *casa*, even near, maybe I can get up through from the stables to her rooms. We can’t stay there, but she can take us down to her *villa urbana*.” She looked up sharply. “You know don’t you, that if she stays loyal to Taran we will be sitting ducks. There won’t be any hope.”

He shrugged. “There’s none now. Is she smart enough to stay alive? If he finds out she helped you her neck is on the line, too.”

Desperation stuttered into laughter in her throat. “Will you rescue her too?”

Somewhere under the fear and injury, she had a backbone made of steel. Life had taught her a lesson every soldier learned young: if you have to jump from a cliff, jump with both feet and enjoy the fall.

“Wait here.” She pulled the rug tighter around her shoulders and looked up from the sidewalk, her eyes aglow with the risk she was taking. “If I’m not back in an hour, run.” She started to turn away, then moved back in close to the wheel. “Thank you. If this goes wrong, thank you for everything.”

“It won’t go wrong.” He winked. “And don’t take an hour.”

Watching her disappear into shadows in the alleyway beside the ducal residence, Marc rubbed a hand over the tender line across his stomach. Damaged flesh was amping up the level of discomfort. It wasn’t deep; he’d certainly had worse. But it crossed the width of his body and sitting hunched over, driving the wagon, kept steady pressure on its whole length. He wanted to straighten out, but each time he did the sensation of tearing flesh pulled him back into a curl. And he wanted to drink more of the poppy-steeped wine, but he had no more faith in the sister-in-law than Marella did. Probably less. If he had to fight, he needed his wits sharp.

One more night would make enough difference. The Druid would have no reason to seed the road with lookouts. Coming this way was the last thing any sane person

would have done, which made it an ideal choice. But Numantia was a long way off on crowded roads. And the nearer he moved to the route from the coast to the Southern interior, the nearer he came to crossing paths with any Romans moving from Britannia to the Mediterranean sun.

Holding a hand against the pain, again, he let himself laugh at that danger. One chance in a million. By all the gods, there was less chance of him surviving tonight than there was of running into Cilo.

He was contemplating the meeting, as he had many times, when an ornately carved *carpentum*, borne down the street by six young men, passed close to the wagon. As it came alongside, the curtain parted enough to see a figure inside signal for him to follow. It might have been Marella. If it wasn't he was in trouble again. He had no choice but to follow.

The small covered litter led him down the neatly laid out streets of the city, moving out through the riverside gate and along the river road toward the banks of the Huerva. When at length they reached the turned iron gates of a walled villa, the *carpentum* stopped briefly while the gates were unlocked and pulled open for both vehicles to enter.

Wary faces stared him up and down as the staff rushed into place to greet their mistress. There was less enthusiasm in encouraging him down from his seat. It seemed even the servants of the nobles in Saragossa had definite ideas about class and position. As he was led into the atrium, however, the servants fell back and left the guests to a private meeting with the lady of the house.

She was a tall woman, solidly built but not soft. She held a protective arm around Marella's shoulders, as if she feared the girl might vanish from her side if she broke the contact. As she turned to study Marc, he stepped back.

The side of her mouth was split and swollen; dark bruises were still forming under the pale skin of her cheek. Shadows inked the hollow under one eye, and marks that could only be the gouges of strong fingers dappled the soft flesh of her upper arm. Fire as hot as hatred burned in her eyes and she glared at him.

"You can go," she sneered, spitting the Latin words as if they left a bad taste in her mouth. "If you cannot leave the city tonight, you can tend your animals and sleep in the stables. I will send a purse with the houseboy."

Marc met her disdain silently for a moment, then turned his attention to Marella. "Okay. That simplifies things."

Her eyes were wide, her mouth had fallen open as she looked from one to the other. "No, Suelta." She turned her appeal to the fiery glare of her sister-in-law. "I can't stay here. I have to get to Numantia, and Marc can take me there."

"You're going to go to the men you refused? Your own brother can barely tolerate the shame, and you want to throw yourself at the feet of the men you insulted?"

She rounded her fury on Marc. "And you want to do that travelling with a farmer?" Pointing a sharp finger at his chest in accusation, as if he embodied her shame, she demanded of Marella, "How much shame do you expect us to ignore on your behalf?"

Marc stepped away from the finger, turning toward the door. What he missed in the words, he understood in the tone. "She's right, Marella. You're better off dead than embarrassed. This fine lady can explain it all to your brother when the hunting party gets back. Make yourself comfortable while you wait."

"Marc, no. Wait." She clung to the fabric of his shirt, following him across the polished marble floor, running to match his stride. As he hauled the door back, she

ducked his arm to step past him, pressing her weight against his chest with both hands. “She doesn’t understand. I haven’t had the time to explain. Stop!”

Leaning against him with as much force as she could find, she closed her eyes and raised her voice. “This was your idea. If you wanted to know how it was going to go, you should have asked me how I thought she would react.”

He stopped. It was true; she had been reluctant to try this solution. And, in fact, it had gone better than it might have. They were under cover for the moment, at least.

All the soft curves of her were pressed against him, as if she would throw her whole body into the balance if it meant he would hear her plea. Her breath was ragged, hot against the flushed skin of his neck; her eyes were bright with pain and fear.

She was weak and damaged. What she needed most was hope and he’d offered the few small tokens he had for her. Slipping the hard, tight air in his chest out on a sigh, he forced a smile. “All right. You talk to her.” Sensing the harridan’s silent approach at his shoulder, he added, “I’ll go to the stables. You make your own choices for the best. If you can stay here, I’ll go back for my boy and head for the coast.” He put gentle hands up onto her arms, slowly moving her weight back from his chest. “Let me know what you decide.” And he slipped sideways past her and down the wide marble steps to the drive.

His annoyance crunched gravel to the hard rhythm of his steps and he rubbed his palms. The cartwheels had left an easy track to follow around the side of the building. Past its squat, flat roofed bulk, a palatial stable complex spread down toward the river below.

There was no point reconsidering his words now, but he should have said ‘I will take you to Numantia.’ He should have made it plainer; it was what he wanted to do.

[top]

CHAPTER SEVEN.

Pressing trembling fingers hard over her eyes, Marella let herself sag against Suelta’s firm presence. She needed to rest. Her abdomen spasmed regular bursts of hot pain up under the bruises on her stomach. Her knees were weak and her nerves were raw with fear.

A few days of recuperation, to sit quietly in the sun while her body mended and her mind calmed itself, that’s what she needed. A chance to think through all that had happened and to formulate a real plan of action that wasn’t predicated on imminent danger.

And Marc to help her explain. His calm certainty; his ability to see past the fear to the solution.

“He deserves better than that, Suelta.” She didn’t raise her head or her voice. The words were as flat and hopeless as she felt. Hollow with exhaustion. “He saved my life, twice.”

“He’s Roman,” she spat. “You even speak Latin for him. For a peasant farmer, Marella.” The words resounded with disappointment. Reproaches echoed behind them. You should know better. How could you? Oh, the shame.

“He’s not Roman.” Steered through the atrium and into the brightly muralled dining hall, Marella carefully lowered herself onto a couch and lay back. Her body cramped and groaned as she straightened, but bit by bit she was able to relax onto its soft contours. “And he’s not a peasant. Look at this.” She flicked a dismissive finger at

the embroidered bindings of her dress. “His wife’s clothes. What do you have to match it?”

She didn’t wait to see Suelta’s appraisal of the fabric, but brought both hands back up to cover her eyes and cheeks. Her fingertips pressed away tears that wanted to fall and she made her breathing steady, rubbing softly at the flush of pain in her cheeks. “I need medicine for pain. What do you have?”

Suelta nodded. “The child, my dear. Did they shake it from the womb?”

Opening her eyes to see her friend's dark concern, she whispered, “No.”

“Then you have to abort it. And soon, too much time has already passed. I have what you will need.” She put a warm hand over Marella’s stomach. “It’s for the best. No child should be born in such shame. And you shouldn’t carry it, or ask the family to.”

She was right. Resting her own hand against the tenderness, her fingers traced the hard mound beneath her skin. An innocent child and its pain filled burden of shame. As Suelta walked to the hallway and called for her servants, Marc’s words echoed in Marella’s heart. Better dead than embarrassed.

Suelta called her instructions, ordering decoctions for pain and cramp, a tonic, and something for bruising. There was an easy familiarity with these medicines and their uses. Her sister-in-law had need of a wide array of curatives for abrasions, pain and bruising. Her marriage had made them necessary.

“Did this,” Marella moved a vague hand toward her friend's latest mosaic of bruises, “have anything to do with me?”

Suelta touched cool fingertips to the black scab on her lip and met Marella’s gaze without balking. “Indirectly. I spoke up against Leucetius and I shouldn’t have. There is something the priest holds over Taran. He felt humiliated, and so…” she shrugged it all away.

“This morning he was sorry. But by then he had something real he could do. He is always bad tempered if he has to sit around the city doing nothing important.” She smiled sadly. “Today he’s out hunting your farmer. I had hoped, for my sake, he would find him.”

“He will if he comes here.”

“He never does that. But I will go back into the city tonight to wait for him.” As a servant rushed forward with a tray of small bottles and a carafe of wine, Suelta perched on the edge of the couch, facing her friend. “You must come back with me and face him. Whatever your explanation is, surely he will accept it. If you won’t believe that, then I will hire you a guard to take you to the Temple of Diana in Valentia. You must resume your vows; it is the only path of honour left open to you.”

“And let Leucetius escape punishment for this?” Marella choked out. “And wait in fear for the day he comes and demands my death? Again. Never.” Anger had lifted her from the couch, and carefully, Suelta pushed her shoulders back onto the softness.

“Here.” A goblet of wine doctored with a few drops of medicine was proffered and Marella took it thankfully. “Your only hope against Leucetius is Taran himself. Come back with me to the city. Leave your farmer to run for the hills and let your family look after the slur to your name.”

“Taran won’t believe me. He didn’t before and he won’t this time.” She took a deep breath. “And I may know what it is that the priest holds over him. Even if I’m wrong, he favoured the priest over me last time and he will do it again.”

“You can’t know that. What do you know that would turn him against his own flesh and blood? He would have taken your side, but how could he believe you were

raped if you didn't come forward for four months? I want to believe you. I want to stand beside you, but I cannot understand how this could have happened."

"Where do you get your medicine from?" Marella took a long draught of wine and relaxed back, eyes closed, and tried to put her thoughts in order.

"The physician, of course. What a question?"

"And where does he get his plants and remedies? Who keeps the gardens and the stocks of herbs he needs?"

"Marella, please. We need to sort out your problems, not source up medicines."

"The priests, Suelta. The Druids know more about herb lore than the physicians do. Even the Romans know that. Every commander knows that." She opened her eyes and faced her sister with the same frank certainty Marc had offered her. "Every soldier knows that, and how to make sleeping draughts, and what their effects are. Taran knows my story is possible. He knows what happened to me, and he knows how, and he did nothing to stop the priest. Nothing."

Tension ached in her sore stomach and she lay back again, sipping some more of the medicated wine. "And when my baby made it a scandal he couldn't hide, he handed me over to that vile filth so he wouldn't have to dirty his hands with my blood."

Suelta stared at her. The trembling in her neck and shoulders was so pronounced she seemed to nod in an endless assent to the facts. "You were drugged?"

"Yes."

"Maybe he didn't think of that." Her words were too soft, too hopeless to carry conviction. "He was so angry. The priest had given him a story he could believe. Perhaps he just didn't think."

"You said yourself the Druid had something over Taran."

Suelta did nod, one clear movement that left her face fallen, too weak to lift.

"I think I know what that is. I think they know why I took my vows in the first place, and Taran would rather I was dead than have anyone ever find out that truth."

Her sister's face was pale as alabaster, cold and still as stone. "What? Tell me." She seemed to prepare herself for death or something worse.

Marella kept her eyes closed, her head back, speaking words she'd vowed never to utter. Sounding as if she was reciting a litany, she poured the words into a featureless stream. "For five years Sarnicio di Arevaci was my lover. All the time I lived in Numantia, from fifteen until I was twenty. Then he told me he had decided I should marry his nephew, Kares.

"I refused, and said I would consecrate myself to the Virgin before I would ever let another man touch me. He seemed pleased by that." A sneer crept over the bland cadence, but she let it go and finished the story as calmly as she could.

"He has another child there with him, now. I know I could have done worse than Kares. I know him, he isn't a bad man, but I wasn't in my right mind. Why do you think they all let the insult go so easily? Why did you think I made such an extreme sacrifice?" She paused as Suelta considered the implications.

"Not my brother, though. He would never let it pass if he found out. He couldn't go after Sarnicio, he's *princep* of the whole province; he has Roman cohorts at his command as well as his own men. So, when the priest handed him a way to ensure my silence, he took it. And Leucetius was probably the one who told Taran of Sarnicio's taste for young women in the first place." The Druid would have known then that she would have no man to stand up for her. She made the perfect victim.

She opened her eyes. Fatigue cost too much to let her feel any more shame for her past. Surely she'd paid more than enough for the poor choices of a child.

Suelta's face was paler still. It had moved from white to translucence as if she had no more than will to keep her in place. "How could you? Why did you never tell me?"

"I was a child." Anger crept up to fill the emptiness of her confession. "And I would have told you once we were married. I thought I would be mistress of the whole province." She laughed, a sharp sound full of pain and regret. "I thought he loved me."

"Men don't love." Suelta drew a savage breath. "They are not like us. They are driven by demons much harder than those we know. We love. They do not. We have our children and friendships. They must have bloodshed and brotherhood and virility.

"Look at Taran. He is so proud of his children, they are fine and strong, but it is me who loves them and nurtures them. He does not. Men do not love the way we do."

She forced her ghostly self to her feet and pressed her argument. "You're right. Taran will never forgive this. Never. If he knows; if he knew... And, I was right. You must return to your vows to the goddess."

"I can't go back to her temple. The priestesses didn't protect me from Leucetius. I have to go to Sarnicio. If he still thinks of me as his lovestruck pet, if I swoon at him, he is the only one who can challenge Leucetius and win."

"What hope is there of that plan succeeding, Marella. It's ridiculous." She pressed her forehead on her fists as she paced the *cenarium* floor. "You won't make it to Numantia. Even if I paid you a royal guard, Taran will find you before you are halfway there. It would have been better for you if you had died. No man is ever going to accept you, now. The temple is your safest place, your only place."

Better dead than embarrassed? Better not to try than to fail?

"Not all men are animals, Suelta." Pushing herself upright, Marella reached for the carafe and poured another glass of wine. Speaking the words aloud made them feel a little more real. She wanted to believe it was true, despite her lifetime's experience.

Suelta found another river of mortification in which to flounder helplessly. "No Marella. Don't you tell me you mean *him*." The word spat so hard it sprayed down her split lip, and she wiped angrily over her chin.

Marella had no answer and no desire to argue any more. If she had not been so entirely drained, she might have cried for all that she had once believed, and all she could never hope to know. It was true, she was unacceptable. She could no longer pretend any virtue, and she had nothing to sustain any sort of pride. The temple and her vows, they were the best future she could hope for. She needed to rest.

And she needed to help Suelta feel justified before she died from shame. She nodded calmly, resigned to the shattering of dreams. "I need you to hire me a guard. It will take a few days, I know, but I can stay hidden here and heal. I need for you to help me get to Numantia.

"If Sarnicio will take up my case, then Leucetius will be dead and the scandal will be suppressed. Taran will have no need to fear me and I'll be able to go to the isolation of the main temple in Valentia. It is the only way I can survive this.

"Will you do that for me? Let me hide here for a few days while you go back to the city and arrange a secret caravan for me?"

Suelta stumbled between fainting with relief and the terror of defying her husband. "He will go on his way alone?" She nodded toward the rear wall.

"Yes." Marella managed a small smile of reassurance. "He'll go and collect his son from the farmer who is caring for the child, and then go to Britannia. You don't have to worry about any further scandal there."

Suelta visibly relaxed. The tension in her colourless form vanished, leaving even less to hold her up. "And I will mix you silphium and gentiane. Also an alkanet pessary.

While you rest here with a physician near, you must use them to rid yourself of the child."

"Yes. I must." Marella mirrored her friend's slump. "Now I need to rest. I'll need clothes and medicine. When you go back to the city tonight, will you get me all the things I'll need for the journey?" She paused, searching lists of needs to bring forward. "You'll have to stay away from here while you make these arrangements. If you start disappearing back to this villa, Taran is going to get suspicious. Especially when he finds no trace of Marc or me in the hills."

Forcing herself unsteadily to her feet, Marella finished, "Where can I sleep today?"

In the vast stables Marc filled the day wandering among the stalls of fine horseflesh. All the animals shared a bloodline, that was plain. Their form was muscular, with deep chests and heavy bones. Their faces were fine, with the large bright eye of the Arabic types.

The sounds and smells of a stable relaxed the tensions from his shoulders. He was comfortable among horses, and after a few hours of careful insinuation, the men who tended them. None of the villa's staff were overtly welcoming. Ice and steel more aptly described their hospitality, but he had managed by evening to feel less threatened when he sat by the strapper's hearth.

The horses were Suelta's husband's great love, but these animals were his gifts to her. She neither rode nor took an interest in them, so they were sold or sent to the large family villa at Contrebia Belaisca. The *dux* provided horses for his entire standing army, and Marc let pride lead the old horsemen to give him numbers and positions for about two hundred men. On horses like these that would be more than enough to stop one injured girl. One man on one of these horses could ride at full stretch for days.

Her brother made a formidable enemy.

By night they had extended their hospitality to allowing him a small tack room. It had a small brazier and a clean bed. It was better than straw under the wagon and he took it with thanks.

Lying back to listen to the sounds of the horses settling for the night, he sipped a large mug of warmed honeyed wine and worked through differing scenarios in his head. He didn't trust the sister-in-law, not one jot. Any woman who carried bruises like that back to her husband for more, had flaws in her view of herself and in her view of the world.

Until he knew what Marella intended he could do little more than speculate.

He drew a long slow sip of wine, letting the sweet aromatics flood his mouth. She was familiar with the same sort of violence her sister accepted. And still she had spirit. The way her lips curved, deep in the corners, suggested a taunt in every smile. Her eyebrows arched readily and her fine nostrils flared as if she shared her family's pride and warrior blood.

Those big dark eyes hid secrets. They challenged him to stand a moment longer, to search their depths until her veiled truths became clearer. There was no way to know how much harm had been done to her. All her oracles, it seemed, were shaped in fear and bruises. But she, he laughed quietly, she was shaped for adoration.

He rubbed tired fingers over his eyes and touched the waxed thread at his throat.

Mists of fatigue soothed the lines of his face like a tender touch and he settled more comfortably into a cushion. He would have slept but for the sudden commotion in the centre hall: snapped calls and the sound of running feet.

He was on his feet beside the cache of knives when Marella walked into his room.

Her smile was tentative, apologetic, and she hovered near the door to save time if he told her to leave. Her fingers twisted in the full skirt of her *tunica*, lifting and crushing it against her thigh before dropping it and gathering it again. She looked up at him, shrugged and looked away. “I got us a day.” Her voice was as thin as a reed. “Maybe two. Will it be enough?” There was no relief in her face, only the returning glimmer of hope that had vanished when the Druid had ridden past.

She should have been relieved. She should have recognized just how much hope she’d bought them. He smiled. “More than enough. Do you want to tell me how you did it? Does she believe you?”

“Yes, she believes me. She thinks I’d be better off dead.” The sadness stayed in her eyes when she smiled. “She’s gone back to the *casa* tonight, and she’ll organize a militia guard to escort me to Numantia in the next day or two. Provided she stays away from here, she won’t know we left until it’s too late.”

She had rested. Some of the grey of fatigue had left her cheeks and her eyes were clearer, but so much more than physical pain plagued her. “You couldn’t tell her the truth?” He didn’t intend it to sound like criticism, but she dropped her face, pulling the soft fabric of her skirt up into a tight wad.

“No. Shame. Family honour. They’re a big deal for us. I told her as much truth as she could stand.”

“I don’t understand,” he said softly. “How does what happened to you become your fault? Why should you carry the shame for someone else’s crime?”

She dropped her dress and raised her hands in an exasperated shrug. “You don’t understand honour.” Once again, she tried, too late, to catch the words. “I’m sorry,” she said irritably. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“No. Don’t apologize.” He waved a hand and turned away from her to shove split kindling at the brazier. Her whole *uncouth peasant* attitude was wearing thin. “You’re right. I don’t understand anything about the type of man who can show his face in public while his wife wears her bruises as her badge of honour.”

“Don’t you insult my brother.” Her eyes and nostrils flared, she stiffened and threw her head back, but he cut her off.

“I won’t. It sickens me too much to hear you defend him.”

Her lips tightened and her hands resumed their fretful scrunching. “I don’t want to argue with you. I came to tell you what I had arranged.”

The silence in her pause demanded that he turn, and he hung his thumbs on his hips to maintain his indignation. “Okay. What else?” There was no victory in the anguish that darkened her features. His hands slid down his thighs and he took a step closer.

“Nothing else. That’s all. But it means that you can go now, if you want to. Tonight, if you want to.”

He stared at her for a long moment, frowning while her knuckles whitened against the soft sky blue of the dress she wore.

“Taran and his men will be back in the city by now, they didn’t plan to be away overnight. Even if they left an ambush at the house again, you can go up the valley for your boy. You’ve got a horse.” She had collected reasons for him and she laid them before him like a gift. “There’s money, too. Suelta wants to pay you to disappear, but I’d like you to take it because you might need it.”

In the bright light of the fire, there were secrets in her eyes he couldn’t read. There was tension around them that suggested unspoken pleas, but he couldn’t tell if she was asking him to go or to stay.

"I already have money." He took a step closer, and small frowns skittered across her forehead. "I don't understand what you want to do."

It wasn't fear in her face, but her breath was too sharp. Her mouth opened and she bit down softly on her lower lip. "I want to go to Numantia. It's the only thing I can do." She dropped her face, studied the ground for a moment. "I can do that now, even if you want to leave."

"Do you want me to leave? Would you prefer to travel with a full guard?"

Her face came sharply up to his and she trembled in his shadow. "No."

"Then why are you here trying to convince me I should go?"

"Because you should have the choice. You have a life and I interrupted it. I can't give you back what you've lost, but you should have the choice to keep what you still have. I understand how dangerous this is for you. You can walk away now knowing I'll be all right. If you want to."

"But you'd prefer if I didn't?" He laced his fingers over his head and laughed, turning slowly, full circle to face her again. "Why?"

She pressed her flat palms hard against her thighs, and forced her neck to straighten as if she dared too much. "Because you don't think I'd be better off dead."

"Then that's reason enough. I think I'd have doubts about travelling with a group of men paid by someone who'd prefer me dead."

She stood a moment, pausing to hear his meaning. "You do that well."

He raised his hands, questioning, and she continued. "I would have believed her. I would have set off with them believing I would get to Numantia."

The smile he tried felt forced and he let it fall. "I might be wrong. But I'm still alive. It's hard to know who to trust."

Golden light reflected in her eyes as she stepped closer, lifting a hand to trail one finger from the open neck of his tunic down along the midline of his chest. "I trust you."

The fire at his back seemed suddenly cooler. The silky kinks of her hair had been pulled into a loose knot at her nape and fine strands spilled down onto her scented shoulders. Sky blue fabric strained over full breasts on each nervous breath and she kept her gaze nailed to the finger on his chest.

He caught her hand and lifted it until her eyes followed up to his.

Some of the colour in her face was rouged, and her eyes seemed clearer and wider with a fine line of kohl along the lashes. When he pulled her against himself, she gasped as bruises jarred, her perfume pulsing up on the heated air around them.

Her body was achingly soft, pressing close enough to wake old longings and they welled into his chest and washed out along his limbs.

"Isn't that reason enough?" he whispered, hot against her ear.

She raised her face, tilted a smooth cheek to hold it against his and turned her lips to touch the hollow under his jaw. Her free fingers slipped the barest touch down the soft linen that lay over his chest and he felt his skin lift, reaching to follow her touch as the warmth in his belly moved closer to anger.

Taking her face between his fingertips, he held her eyes before his. The shadows of her hair blended into the mottled shades of bruising on her throat and he asked again, slightly louder, "Isn't that reason enough?"

Her eyes flicked away, but he held her face so they had to come back, had to meet his and answer. Her palm pressed harder against his chest, pushed the promises from her fingertips and she cocked her hips away from his.

"Are there incentives you want to offer? Should I try for a better deal before I agree?"

His grip on her face tightened as she squirmed to put distance between them, but his hands couldn't harm her and her effort to escape lacked strength. Her lips were close and the yearning that rose on a fiery pulse caught in his chest and ran up his throat.

He lowered his face, touched his lips against the moist softness of hers. For an instant he held her, aching to press his longing into her mouth, to move his lips over the soft skin of her cheek and bury his face in her hair.

Swallowing hard he stepped back, met the sadness in her eyes with the tight hot sorrow of his own, and dropped his hands. "Did I ever give you cause to think I wanted some kind of payment from you in flesh?" he asked, his voice straining as his chest cramped the air from his lungs.

She was utterly still, her face blank and unmoving as silent tears streamed over her cheeks. Only her eyes moved, flicking over his, from one to the other, and down to fix themselves on his mouth.

When he could stand it no longer, he turned and forced his palms against his eyes, rubbing until clouds of pain fogged the darkness. Pressing a hand against his wound, he straightened, arching his back as far as he could and dragging deep breaths into the tight space behind his heart.

He turned back and stepped close enough to whisper, "You're right. I don't have a hope of understanding this kind of honour." Resting a hand on her shoulder, he brushed his thumb down her cheek. "But I do understand the logic of getting help from the one man who has the power to stop the Druid. And I do understand the risks of getting there. Is that what you want to do?"

From the depths of her humiliation, she managed a nod.

"Good. Then be ready with anything you want to bring at sunrise and we'll give it our best shot. No guarantees, just our best."

She raised one hand to smear a stream of tears from her cheek and cleared her throat with a muffled croak. "I saw you in my dream today," she said weakly. "Your goddess is with you."

"My goddess," he repeated and she nodded, still staring at his mouth. "What was she doing?"

"She was a wolf and she lay beside where you stood, watching me."

He grinned and she looked up into his eyes, surprised.

"I know that wolf." He laughed. "What did she say?"

"She didn't say anything. She didn't move. She just lay with her muzzle on her paws, watching me."

He put an arm around her and turned her to the door. "She's reserving judgment then. For now. Let me know if you see her again. I'd like to know what she thinks."

As she walked quietly back down through the long corridor between stables, Marc touched the thread at his neck. His heartbeat pushed a pulse too hard through his flesh and stirred old aches to life. An image of Marella's mouth, dark and soft, a mocking smile touching the corners, made him brush his fingers roughly over his lips. There were secrets and promises there, just as dark and lovely as those in her eyes, and his breath blew harder at the thought.

He poured another mug of wine and lay back onto the bed, slapping at the cushions. Suddenly, sleep and the morning seemed a long way off.

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CHAPTER EIGHT.

Marella wore the same sky blue silk *stola* over a white *tunica*, but she added a burgundy linen *palla* to cover her shoulders and head. Bracing herself against the pitch and roll of the wagon with one hand, she used the other to pull the covering of soft linen and silence in tight around her face.

Marc had chosen a place just back from midway in the length of the travelling convoy. Ahead, a wagon of feed stores and supplies for the caravan rode low on its cantilevered springs. Behind them, a family of artisans headed for work on the great public buildings in Bilbilis.

They were as unremarkable as any other vehicle, but the lingering heat of embarrassment touched Marella's cheeks and left her feeling exposed. The space between them was cold with awkward tension and avoidance of eye contact. It was a harm she'd not intended and not foreseen, and from her tightly bound silence, she looked for a way to bridge the gap.

She had travelled enough to know the routine of a caravan. Something near five hours of travel, broken for three hours while the travellers lunched and the draft teams were rested and watered, and then onward again until the next township or way station. And the silence had filled most of the journey to lunch.

Her gaze wandered down the length of his legs, relaxed and crossed at the ankles where the footboard of the wagon turned up. He looked completely at ease. If not for his reticence and the pale sharp focus of his eyes, she would have judged him unconcerned.

For her, the plaguing issue was twofold.

First, she had misjudged him. Again. Gripping the shawl tighter at her throat, she cursed silently and promised herself, and him, she wouldn't make the same mistake again. In believing that all men answered to the same demons, all men traded in flesh, she had insulted him and she was beginning to know him well enough to understand that. Suelta's words still argued it was true. Marella wanted desperately to believe she was wrong. Wrong, at least, about Marc.

So he had rejected her advance. But Suelta's words insisted more. The only place she could hope to live now was in the great Temple of Diana, in Valentia. She had said Taran would never forgive her and no man would ever accept her. Her vows were the only justification she had to live. Better dead than embarrassed?

Yes, he had refused her, but the touch of his lips hinted at something like hope.

She watched him from the corner of her eye, and when she was sure his attention was firmly fixed on the road ahead, she turned carefully to study his profile. His features were not as sharp as those of her people generally, and his build was not so squat and heavy. He was taller, broader, and not so deep in the chest.

But it was his fair hair and blue eyes that really stood him apart. He was golden, tanned, he shone like the gods themselves. He'd pulled the sun bleached length of his hair back and tied it to minimize the impact, but in a world where most people had brown or green eyes, the sharp clear blue of his were unmistakable. Every time she looked at him, it seemed, she saw them for the first time, and her attention was caught and held by their exceptional light. Nowhere in her world had she ever seen his like.

Carried past her inhibitions by the intensity of her study, she said, "Tell me about where you come from." The sound of her own words shocked her for a moment and she tore her gaze down to her feet.

He seemed unconcerned, pouting and pushing a palm down his thigh as he looked for a place to start. "My mother is a Pict. She comes from the Highlands, at the farthest north end of Caledonia. My father is Caledonian, too, but from the lands further south. I was born in his home town, but my parents were mercenaries, and with small children

they wanted some stability." He looked at her with a warning. "So he joined the Roman Infantry. *Legio XX Valeria Victrix*. Now he's retired, he's Roman. They even gave him Vespasian's name when he received his citizenship."

She looked away briefly and back, silent to ensure no derogatory words could slip out unintentionally. "Your mother was one of the warrior women you spoke about?"

"Absolutely. Would still be if someone would give her a sword and a foe." He was grinning. "But I haven't seen them for six years."

"Was it your mother who said you had to respect women?"

He raised his eyebrows and focused that clear blue gaze on her in deadly earnestness. "No. She respected herself, and my brothers and I would have challenged that belief at extreme peril."

He had a way of slapping her without ever raising his hand, but he smiled and went on. "You'd like her. For thirty years she's lived in Roman towns, but she won't speak Latin." Now he was grinning like a child. "She could. She understands us all perfectly. But she refuses to speak like a Roman."

"How many of you are there?"

"I have four brothers."

"How many live in Hispania?"

"Just one. He owns most of the country."

Marella's eyes flashed a mixture of patriotic denial and noble avarice. "You're exaggerating. Who is he? If he's all you say, everyone will know about him."

"No, he's like me. He likes to lie low and keep himself to himself." Smiling, he relented. "I am exaggerating. He owns two huge estates along the Tagum. He lives near Toletum."

"That's not so far away," she said. "If he's so wealthy and his estates are so huge, there's plenty of room there to hide." She rolled her eyes and frowned. "To live quietly, out of the way, I mean. For you." It seemed she only ever opened her mouth to change feet.

He chuckled at her stumbling attempts to sound less snobbish. "There's an issue of family pride," he answered. "It's exactly the sort of trouble you would understand completely."

"There is nothing about you," she said seriously, frowning slightly over her effort to meet his eyes, "that I understand completely. I don't even understand why you're telling me all this now, when you said you told no one about your past. You said it made no difference."

"That was when I was going to leave you to your family in Caesaraugusta. Now you deserve to know who you've trusted your life to, don't you think?" His smile had gone, and the words sounded like a small apology.

Her frown deepened. "I was wrong. There's nothing I understand about you, at all. Nothing at all."

Gathering herself a moment to think, she reached back behind the seat and lifted the wineskin. Suelta's entire trunk of medicines sat behind her in the tray and Marella had spent the morning blissfully unaware of any hurts. When small cramps began to niggle, she quickly re-medicated.

She had packed most of her sister-in-law's wardrobe, too. "I won't need to wear your wife's clothes now," she said, handing the skin to him.

The way he looked at her and quickly away said he recognized that she'd changed the direction of her questions, and he watched the farmlands passing slowly for a moment.

In a little while he answered, "So I see." It was permission enough.

“What was her name?” Of all his secrets, it was this elegant ghost who most piqued her curiosity.

“Her name *is* Neria,” he answered.

What could she say, ‘What was she like?’, ‘Was she a noble woman?’, ‘Who was she?’ “How did you meet?” she decided.

It was the wrong question. He sat in silence for long moments, with no sign he had heard her speak. He watched the horizon and the jostle of the wagon ahead, then scratched his palm absently, and eventually said, “She was a priestess.”

No priestess dressed like that. No priestess married. Not in any pantheon she knew. Maybe there were gods in foreign lands, in Egypt or in India. “Who did she serve?”

“I don’t know how well you’ll take these answers, Marella,” he said. “I’m already coarse and uncouth. You judge all my choices harshly. If I tell you the truth, you might decide to step off the wagon and walk back to Caesaraugusta.” He gave her his look of stone certainty. “And if you judge her, I’ll put you off the wagon and you can walk anywhere you want.”

“You don’t have to speak of her at all if you don’t want to,” she said.

“What I mean is, I don’t mind telling you. Are you sure you want to know?”

She looked squarely at his condescension, her nostrils flaring slightly in annoyance. Did he think her so sheltered, so naive and guarded from scandal? Had a high born priestess forsaken her vows for a soldier? Would she be the first? Her own life had proven the corruptibility of temple servants.

Men. Were they all so impressed by themselves? “What’s so shocking? Do you have a scandal so much greater than mine?”

“No, I told you there’s no scandal.”

“Then what? Tell me.” She deigned to meet his immovable stone with a smile. “Who did she serve?”

“Luperca.” He studied her face; she could feel his eyes fixed on her as she considered the word. Luperca had no priestesses. She was the wolf who nursed the founders of Rome, immortalized. She had a small priesthood on the Palatine Hill in Rome, and her devotees were shepherds. Not noblewomen. Marc’s wife was no shepherdess.

She shook her head slowly. “There’s more to this answer. The wolf goddess is yours, isn’t she? I saw her with you.”

“I don’t have any goddess. I don’t have any faith in the gods at all.”

“But, my dream, I told you and you said you knew her.”

He sighed, and smiled sadly. “I don’t know what you dream about. Or what it means. Your dream struck me as funny, that’s all.

“When I met her, my wife lived on the estates that my brother now owns, and she was travelling through Britannia. Back then, a prostitute who called herself High Priestess of Luperca owned them. And all her girls were priestesses.”

“All her girls?” Marella frowned harder. Her thoughts were rushing her in a direction she was reluctant to follow. She locked her jaw, afraid it might gape. Her hand tangled in the fabric of her *palla*, ready to jam it into her own mouth if she made any of her usual blunt pronouncements.

“Don’t speak,” he warned her quietly. “I can see what’s going through your mind.”

When she looked up at him, he was grinning, but shock wouldn’t let her share his humour. He was right; silence was her best option for the moment at least. Her returning grasp of Latin was teasing up explanations. There was a clear link between prostitutes

and wolves. The girls who were called Lupae; whose skills were likened to the wolf; who were even said to be wolves at night.

Beside her Marc laughed to himself, pleased that he had at least been able to shock her silent.

Twice she turned to him and opened her mouth to speak, then thought better of it. No matter how she turned it, the same facts came to mind. She was a prostitute. He had married a prostitute.

And the child. She wanted to ask when he came into the family, but there was no way to ask that without questioning his paternity.

The silence was becoming more damning than her questions, and she made herself speak. “She wore lovely clothes.”

His expression softened, and he put an arm around her shoulders to acknowledge the effort she was making, wrapping her in warm safety and teasing acceptance. “She did.” Too soon he laughed and took his arm back. “Is there anything else?”

“There will be.” Once she had a chance to consider the implications of it all, and to decide how she felt about it. “I keep asking myself what world you come from, and every time you answer that for me, it gets harder for me to work out where you fit.”

“I don’t fit. Not in your world, and I’m not too sorry about that.”

“But....” She was pleading for every solid truth she had ever held. He didn’t laugh; he wore his mantle of calm equanimity and she spoke from her heart. “There are rights and wrongs, good and bad, standards and positions and expectations. There just are. There are rules we all live by, and you break them all. I don’t understand how you do it.”

“There’s money and power, status and prejudice,” he answered. “And all the rules that make the people with plenty feel better about letting everyone else have nothing. When you start deciding who’s honourable based on what they own or where they live or what family they’re born into, you’re way off the track.”

He lifted a hand to say enough. “You should sit under a tree one day with my father. In fact, once you’ve spoken to the big man in Numantia, I’ll take you to meet him. Now he’s retired, he’d love nothing more than to lecture some unsuspecting soul for hours on his favourite philosophies of life.”

Marella dropped her head into her hands and took a deep breath. After Numantia? He was too far ahead. Looking past the fear again. She could see no further than Sarnicio’s *casa*. After that, everything turned black and hopeless, and only the thought that Leucetius might be dead gave her courage enough to follow Marc’s vision.

“After Numantia? I don’t want to look that far ahead.” Speaking from between her palms, she let her fingers cover her face like a mask. “I don’t think my options are as bright as a pilgrimage to hear your father’s wisdom.

“Sarnicio may refuse to hear me. He might listen, then hand me back to Taran and the priest. Or he might do everything I ask.” She lifted her face and dusted her hands down her *tunica* as if there was filth there that stained her for all to see. “Then he’ll send me to the Temple of the Goddess in Valentia to resume my vows.”

Bleak beyond consideration. Even if she could look beyond the fear, there was little point. Past the fear was hopelessness. At least Marc recognized the seriousness of her situation. Her brow pinched over the cruelties of fate as she looked to him for words of encouragement.

He was grinning. When he saw her consternation, he shrugged and looked away. “Sorry,” he mumbled. “I’m not clear on the demands of your gods and goddesses.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t mean anything.” He tried for a show of respectful penitence, but laughter glittered in his eyes, and when he faced her it broke across his mouth. “Except, who are the vows for now?”

She glared hard ice at him. Atheist! “Vows are a commitment. You can’t choose to ignore them if you change your mind. They aren’t a rule you can break if they don’t suit you.” Huffily she gathered herself behind the only shred of hope she could still hold. But to protect herself, or to protect the only truth she still held, she could not say.

“No.” He had mastered his amusement. He forced a frown that pulled unsteadily on one eyebrow, and averted his gaze.

“They are a dedication of purity. To Diana. Forever.”

“Good. Okay.” The frown eased and he schooled a look of serious consideration. “So it’s about the promise you made to your goddess and not about your family looking for somewhere out of the way to hide you.” Then a look of genuine concern. “It’s only about the promise. The state of purity doesn’t matter to the goddess or to the oracle?”

Fury grew like ice along her spine, crept up her neck, tightened her lips and sharpened her tongue. “What do you know about fulfilling a commitment? Or about purity?” The fire in her blood met ice, and her breath choked into hard words. “You’re a soldier who runs away from Rome, and your wife....” Somewhere between ice and fire, the flames were doused abruptly by a wash of intuitive caution.

His expression hadn’t changed, he waited on her answer with deep interest, but his eyes showed hints of ice she could never hope to match. When her silence hung between them, he raised his eyebrows. “Are you going to finish that thought?”

He was too close. She could feel the warmth of his shoulder beside her. In the dry breeze of midday, she could smell him and he smelled of security and relief. There was an ominous stillness in his hands and cold focus in his eyes that threatened that security. But there was no violence around him.

“You insulted me,” she said, struggling to find enough high ground to take a stand. He had threatened the only solid thing she had left.

“I asked you a question. I didn’t intend to insult you.”

“Don’t be so indignant Marc, you laughed at me.” She met the cold stare until it softened. He may even have conceded. A little bit. “Sometimes I say the first thing that comes to mind and it’s out before I think, but you did insult me and my beliefs, and you laughed at me.”

“I don’t think you say things like that without thinking. I think comments like that are honed as sharp as you can make them.” He turned back to the road, paying careful attention to untwisting a section of rein. “You can’t hit with your fists the way your brother does, so you do it with your lip.”

Denials rushed up. There were times when she chose her words carefully, when she jabbed them and twisted them specifically to cause pain. That was true. She had always had a sharp tongue and quick temper. And in this world of men, it had caused her trouble more often than not. It had won her beatings before today.

But she hadn’t felt the rush of panic that comes with goading a violent adversary. And she hadn’t felt the cold elation when a barb hit home. Not with him. He deserved better.

“Well, I thought better of it,” she said. “But I do say things without thinking, too.” She paused, drawing herself up around the fear of knowing she would have to go on if she started, and added, “And there’s a lot of pain tied up in the subject of these vows.”

The mules might have walked to Rome itself without another command from him, but he studied the tension on their mouths and the lay of the reins over their backs as

though it was vital to them all. The pressure to fill the space he left for her centred itself in her chest, forcing her heartbeat up as her head went light with fear.

There was only so much she could say, but the seal on her silence had been broken with Suelta, and somehow Marc represented less danger than her best friend. "I made the decision to take my vows at a bad time. I was hurt and angry and trying to achieve something hopeless by threatening to do something extreme."

"Extreme sums it up well," he said. "Even for a religious fanatic, forever is a long time. Or is a vow of perpetual virginity just one of the things you said without thinking?"

Her glare dismissed the question, and he made an obvious effort to block a smile as she found her way back to the story. "As you can see, no one rescued me. In fact," she paused to meet his eyes, "the man involved made sure my consecration went smoothly. He paid very well to ensure the question of virginity was never formally raised."

This time Marc could not contain his amusement. "You have to give our moral guardians their due. The priesthood can always be relied upon to find a smooth path through any ethical dilemma, given enough gold."

Her situation was ridiculous, and if it wasn't so painful she might have been able to share his sense of humour. "Yes, so as you pointed out earlier, I have no cause for self respect. And, it's all a farce -- except for my commitment and my honour to the goddess. She's older and wiser than the people who control her temple. She knows my circumstances, she knows my reasons, and she knows my heart."

"Okay." He relented. "So this is just between you and your goddess. It isn't about family honour or shame or the men in your life covering their reputations by silencing you."

"Does that answer your question?"

"It's an answer. I'm not convinced it's true. I think your justifying your choices to me, and to yourself. But it is an answer."

She threw her hands up. "How much more open do you want me to be? I pour out my heart to you and you just grin and call me a liar. Why don't you credit my trust in the goddess?" His words needled too close to her own silent doubts and she swallowed hard.

"Because last night you said you trusted me, and the way you said it suggested you weren't too concerned about your vows. And," his grin was infuriating, "you just said the best result you could hope for didn't make your future very bright. You didn't sound like you were in a rush to get back to the ladies in the Temple."

Such an exasperating man. And always two steps ahead. But he understood less than he thought he did. He had no idea about her child, or the implications returning to the temple had for the infant. "Last night...." She looked down into her lap, watching her fingers straighten the fringe on her wrap. She couldn't let him see her panic or her frantic search for justifications. "I didn't know just how far I could trust you. I didn't know if I would be safe travelling with you."

"And you were testing me? Well, that would explain your disregard for the twenty stable staff who would have witnessed the indiscretion."

Her eyes flared in sudden horror, and a gasp stopped in her throat.

"But you thought of that, surely?" He smiled. "They were your insurance against harm, weren't they?"

"Yes." She struggled for defiance. "And anyway, who would listen to a gaggle of servants?"

"Your brother will as soon as he finds out what his wife did."

Marella stuttered over each breath as a sudden rush of heat assaulted her, beating in her stomach and hammering in her chest. Her mouth was instantly dry, her eyes wide and dark. Suelta and her household were in terrible danger; that was true. But it wasn't a realization of their fate that rushed heat into her cheeks as she turned to face him. Gripping one hand tight enough with the other to hurt hidden bruises in the joints she asked, "And if there'd been no witnesses?"

"No witnesses?" He raised his brows and turned to face her. "No one to know or care who you are or what you did?"

Harsh breaths dragged too quickly over her aching throat, cramping in her bruises and burning in her eyes as she fixed on him like he was hope. "If there were no witnesses," her words had become scratched and dry, but she managed to force them out, "would you still have sent me away?"

The transition from amusement to warmth was instant, and she leaned closer to him, willing his arm over her shoulder. He turned from her and resumed his study of the draft team, thinking in silence for long moments. When he answered, his voice was soft with reassurance or regret. "Aye."

One word, and it cut her heart. If there was any light in her future it hung on his answer. She needed to see his face, to let him see her hope, and she reached to touch his thigh, bringing her face as close as the narrow seat and her sore stomach permitted. "Why?"

He turned his calm even gaze to her and studied her desperation. "Because you're hurt." His eyes stayed focused on hers and his fingers slipped over her hand. "Maybe there's a part of you that wanted to prove the worst is true, because that's all you know. Or maybe you feel powerless and you think your body is the only currency you have. But now that I know more about your past, I'd say that you're still trying to find a desperate solution to your hopelessness."

Dark pain throbbed from her heart, filling her chest. Everything she had ever known cried out for her to deny his words and claim back some courage and self-reliance. But she couldn't find the strength to make the lie persuasive.

He didn't just challenge her defences, he denounced them decisively. He didn't guess, he was right and he knew it. But he didn't denounce her.

Swallowing in an effort to clear the knot of pain from her throat, she groped blindly for any answer she could give. Intuitively, she reached for the only subject he balked at. "I trust my goddess. Even if all the people around me have their own agenda, their own needs and their own beliefs, I trust her." She let those words sit for a moment, then added, "You laughed at her ability to keep me safe. But she brought you to me and gave me hope, so how can you doubt her wisdom? Unless you doubt yourself?"

For an instant, she had the slim satisfaction of seeing him taken aback. It was small, a jot, but by the time he laughed, it had given her enough courage to smile with him.

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CHAPTER NINE.

Leading the mules back to their traces, Marc looked over to the small clutch of women who remained by the fire. He'd spent the lunch break identifying the principal of the caravan: the merchant who owned the majority of the cargo in transit. From there he had made a fair guess at which of the travellers were armed guards. Some of the

drivers were independents, moving as he was with the cover of a larger caravan and therefore, with the security of a paid escort. And some were militiamen.

Most of the women belonged to family groups and those were busy helping their men reload their wagons. But the group Marella had found were women of leisure. None of them had moved from their richly upholstered gazebo until servants had been required to pack and stow the canvas and couches. Even then they remained in a tight circle at the fire, laughing and drinking while the work went on around them.

Marc smiled over clips and fastenings, watching the group again from across the back of a mule. The ladies had called for a good number of flasks of wine through their luncheon and some had adopted a rather languid approach to style. Without their couches to recline upon, they stood draping their lean elegance over each other.

Marella stood a little apart.

The group might have been family, certainly they shared their colouring and slim build. They were all of a similar age, and they enjoyed a pretentiousness that Marella couldn't match. They laughed too loud; their posturing was designed to attract notice. They were ladies used to being the centre of attention.

Her figure was more richly curved, her eyes darker and her mouth fuller. When she laughed it was restrained, shown more than heard in the shine of her eyes and the turn of her lips.

When the wagon was ready to move, he leaned back against the boards, picking at his fingers with a small paring blade, waiting. He hadn't noticed her attention on anything he was doing, but when he looked up at them, she was walking back toward him. One of the girls followed and another three watched from the fire.

She looked up with a small smile that vanished when the girl spoke unexpectedly from behind. "Marella, why didn't you bring your driver to lunch?"

She met his gaze briefly, then turned. "I'm sure he had better things to do." Her voice betrayed no irritation, but she put herself squarely in front of him. "And I'm not sure your father would be happy about a stranger eating with you, unchaperoned."

"I always think that what Father doesn't know won't upset him too much." The young woman sidestepped Marella and moved to stand at Marc's side. "Especially when it comes to strangers we'll never see again."

"Yes, I suppose you're right." Marella reached to put her hand in his and stepped up into the wagon. Her eyes had the soft focus of too much wine washing over a generous selection of medications. "The trouble with strangers is, you can never be sure who they are or when you might see them again."

If there was a warning in her words, the young visitor ignored it. "I could make sure I see you again," she whispered to Marc. "From here to Nertobriga I can think of a few places I might see you, up close like this."

She was pretty. Her hair waved in the same way Marella's did, but her skin was powder-whitened and ghostly, her lips were stained scarlet with alkanet and her eyes and brows were heavily kohled. He had thought her older, but standing so close it was obvious she was in her mid-teens. Half his age.

He grinned and said, "If I understood a word of that, it would probably be an offer I couldn't refuse." Laughing to himself, he turned to step up onto the *carra*. "As it is, I'm guaranteed a lot less trouble."

The young woman stared after him blankly, and Marella wiped stray hairs from her face and spoke for his benefit. "Couldn't refuse, huh?"

As the mules moved into the line and the caravan resumed its slow progress, he watched her press her fingers on her lips and balance using both hands on the seat.

Before he found the words for his amusement, she said, “I might have had too much wine.”

The soft warmth of her shoulder pressed against him and raised a rash of sensitivity over the skin of his side. “Too much for what? Did you have something planned, other than sitting or sleeping for the next four hours?”

“No.” When she brought her face up to him, the teasing smile touched her mouth and her unfocused gaze shone. “But you confuse me. I have to remember my Latin and keep my thoughts straight. I should have been more careful, but it was good to laugh with a group of girls and gossip and drink too much. I haven’t done that for a very long time.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it.” She glowed under the harm she’d been done, and a childlike sense of fun sparkled in counterpoint to the womanly curves of her body. “Don’t the priestesses enjoy a drink? Or is gossip forbidden in the hallowed halls?”

“No, they drink. And gossip. But I was pretty much excluded. I don’t want to talk about that, it doesn’t matter.” Her words slurred together as she rushed them out. “I want to tell you about those young ladies.”

“Good idea. Tell me what she said.”

“She made you an offer you had better refuse and keep on refusing.”

“That’s not very accommodating of you, Marella. Why? The young lady looked very confident in her own choice.” He laughed and Marella turned a small sneer.

The tiny mole above her lip caught his eye and he watched her soft full mouth move as she spoke. “Why? Do I need to tell you?” She shook her head, but her smile ticked in the creamy skin of her cheek. “They’re no better than trade; you can see that, surely. They’ve got money, but it’s crass merchant money. That should be enough.” She turned her cold disdain down her nose at him for a moment, but his amusement distracted her from her air of superiority.

“It’s worse than that, though. Their father is Marcelus di Sicoris, do you know him?”

He shook his head, still smiling at her.

“I bet your brother does. He lives in Ilerda. He is *the* merchant money in the whole Ilerda *municipium*.” She paused and raised her eyebrows as if that was as much as he needed to know to draw the correct conclusion.

He opened his palm for more.

“He controls the trade to and from Tarraco.”

“Aye, and?”

“Slaves, Marc. He’s a slaver and he trades through the port at Tarraco. You must have heard of the place?”

He had. “So, you don’t recommend I encourage his daughters?”

Her indignation was priceless; the wine left her revulsion as open and obvious as if it were slime forming on her skin. “I don’t recommend it, no. Unless you can’t refuse a young painted scrubber.” She watched the Jalon River pass. “Or four of them.”

He laughed, enjoying the clear autumn sunshine and the rising afternoon breeze. Stirring the fire in her eyes to a blaze felt like a good way to fill the journey. “All four?” He whistled under his breath, considering the possibilities she put forward. “Still, a slaver for a father. That is risky. But what’s a life without a few risks?”

Marella turned her eyes to him, glaring from under heavy lids, her thick lashes hiding all but dark menace. The smile stayed on her mouth. “There’s more than one kind of risk.”

Leaning closer, so his shoulder pressed harder against hers, he let his words rasp against the soft skin of her cheek. “A dangerous woman. That cost might be more than I could meet.”

“Especially,” she said scornfully, “if you’re exhausted.”

Laughter caught in his abdominal muscles and pulled at the line of pain across his belly. Pushing himself straight, he pressed his forearm along its length and cocked his head to the side. “I’d given up worrying about being stabbed while I slept. Thinking about it will keep me awake all night, now.”

“Good.” She fought to keep her smile controlled.

The dark lines on her throat had clearer definition as the bruising rose to the skin. Each time she loosened her *palla*, they glared against the pale skin, evidence of a crime against innocence. He studied the long gold threads that dangled from her ears, catching glints of sunlight in the deep burgundy shadows around her hair. Soft perfume of citrus blossom kissed the air around her.

The skin of her cheek was clear and pale in the afternoon sun, smooth and flawless, and the desire to touch a fingertip to her lip rose impulsively to burn in the pit of his stomach. With an elbow on his knee, he rested his chin forward onto his palm and pressed the smile away with his knuckles. Considering the di Sicoris girls had led his imagination down derelict paths and sharpened his sense of loneliness and isolation.

He took a deep breath to fill the void and turned back to Marella. For better or worse, life was moving again and he had her to thank for that. “What else did you learn from the young ladies?”

Her expression softened. “That they have very, very good wine.”

“It can’t have been too good. There’s wine for drinking that’s good enough for getting drunk. And then there’s very good wine. That should be sipped and savoured.”

This time, when she smiled it lit her whole face, and Marc caught a glimpse of the joy that might once have been common. It lingered just behind the fear and the bruises, sparkling in her eyes like a victory fire. “Only the very best is fit to drink. And it’s the only way to get drunk. Anything less and it isn’t worth facing the consequences. Find the very best and drink it to the dregs.”

He searched her joy. “These girls have wine that good?”

She paused, frowning when she heard the innuendo in his question, but her smile remained and brightened. “You’re right. There’s better.”

Marella swallowed giggles. She wanted to laugh with him and completely relax. The warm glow of the wine made her want to forget all the tomorrows that might come. She wanted to forget all her yesterdays, to throw them all away and start afresh.

That could never happen.

Marc shone like gold riding into the afternoon sun. His teeth were white and even under his tan, so his smile returned the sunlight. She rubbed the numbness at her lips and let a small sigh slip through her nose. He was stunning. And she was becoming more used to the strangeness of his colouring. And smart enough, she would have believed him educated but that seemed unlikely.

And irritating. He enjoyed needling her, that was obvious. He liked to try to nudge her from her pedestal, too sure of himself to see his own prejudices. Her smile was sadder. It was unthinkable. If he was gentle and strong and brave and even honourable in ways she had not thought possible, it only made it worse that he was a foreign peasant. And halfway Roman. It was too unfair.

She turned her resolve up to him. If the goddess had brought him to keep her safe, then she could at least know the worst up front. “Will you tell me the rest of your

secret past, now?" Maybe the goddess had given him secrets that made a difference. "Tell me about the issue of family honour between you and your rich brother."

"I don't have any issues with him. The issue is with his in-laws. Or rather, with one of them, and he has a serious grievance against me. He's not a man to give up on a grudge, either." He grinned like the idea of a *vindicta* was so much froth, or an annoyance like a persistent insect.

"He is Oppius Pompeius Bassus, called Cilo. He was *Tribune Laticlavius* of Agricola's Twentieth Legion. My brother Lucius wanted a discharge, and he wanted to take Cilo's sister with him. The long and short of it is, Cilo refused, and I took Luc's side in an argument involving knives."

His eyes sparkled with the memory. If he had any regrets about that day, he had put them aside long ago. He chuckled as he clarified, "Insubordination is the least of my crimes, in Cilo's view. The way he had it planned, Luc would stay in service and his sister would stay with him. He couldn't have things his way and he can't burn my brother at the stake because his sister would never speak to him again. In the end, Luc even got his discharge. But I'm the scapegoat." He smiled again.

"So, I was forced to take an extended leave from the Roman army."

Marella shared his sense of amused indifference. The choice made sense to her. "You did well." She gave a quick nod and smiled. "You sided with family over a Roman. And a noble at that, sent off by his daddy to play soldiers before his stint running the empire. Good for you."

"That's a mistake you should never make when it comes to Cilo. He's in the army because that's what he loves and that's what he does best. I promise you, I'd rather keep out of his way than have to face him any time soon."

"Well, you won't. Not over here."

"I just might, though. He'll be finished his five years as tribune right about now, and he'd be guaranteed to be heading for the estate to see his baby sister. And Luc. And me, if he can find me. He's the reason we left the villa when we did."

"He'll go to the Capital. All Romans live for the day they get to go to the Capital to live in luxury."

"How many Romans do you know?" He was nudging again. His eyes sparkled with a challenge that called her a bigot.

She pushed the linen back from over her head and let the breezes tease at loose strands of hair. "I've known a few. Not well, thankfully. And your Cilo doesn't seem to be a high recommendation for the race of lords."

"I personally would prefer to have him on my side, than against me. In fact," he chuckled again at something obscure, "I'd call him my friend tomorrow, if he didn't want to kill me so badly. It was just one bad moment in an otherwise perfectly satisfactory association."

"So you never wanted to leave the army?" So much for hoping his secrets were going to give any encouragement. "You would have stayed and fought for Rome and earned your citizenship?"

"I don't know what might have happened. I might have tired of it and moved on, but I didn't want to see anyone stop my brother from leaving. So the choice was made for me." He moved so his face was turned down to hers, his brow almost touching hers and said quietly, "Maybe your goddess was planning to get me over here, all the way back then."

Marella met his eyes, let her gaze trickle down over the golden planes of his cheek and come to rest on his lips. Would her goddess bring him so far, to be so close, and still so far away? "And your wife's goddess, what was her place in the plan?"

The sharp pain of loss darkened his eyes and pinched his features so she reached toward him, trying to meet his sadness with a touch.

"Her goddess only ever intended to lend me so much beauty. No one heart could hold onto that much love forever."

All the laughter had gone out of him. His pain was too big to be held in the space of one man's chest, and it leaked into the air she breathed. Wine rose in tears for him, and all her own sufferings clamoured to offer understanding and empathy. "You can't have had long together. Not if your tribune has just finished his term."

He shook his head and turned to watch the bright day plodding by. "No. Not long."

"Good things in life never seem to last, do they. But pain is endless. You can wake up every day and hope it's all been a nightmare and at last it's over, but it just goes on and on. Is there a reason for that, do you think?"

From somewhere he found a smile and her heart tripped over the courage it took. He shrugged. "It's like luck, good and bad. Is it Fortuna handing out blind favours, or is it only the choices we make paying out?" Speaking to the air, as if he'd discussed it with the universe many times, he said, "Every single choice we make, every minute of every day, pays out eventually, for good or bad. You just can't always tell at the time which way it will go."

He blamed himself, she thought. Or the choices he'd made. "Before the Romans renamed all our gods," she said, "Fortuna was an aspect of Dhanoa, and she blessed mothers and rewarded her devotee's hard work with abundance. It sounds like you should turn to her."

This time he laughed, although there was not a lot of humour in the sound. "One day I'll find a god who doesn't kick people down just so he can laugh at their struggle to get back up. When I find that god, I'll worship. Until then, I'll just take responsibility for my own life."

She smiled for him and put a hand on his shoulder. "Until then, you have your wolf with you." She paused and wiped her hair back, then slipped the linen back up to shade her face. "I wonder if she's made up her mind about me."

"I wouldn't worry too much about it. She liked everybody." He nodded, and the joy of her memory lightened some of the darkness in his eyes. "She was a very poor judge of character, actually. She found something good in everyone. Except Cilo." It sounded like a pronouncement, or a grave warning. "Him, she never liked. She was frightened of him."

"And what did you like about him that she couldn't see?" Marella rubbed both hands over her face. The numbness around her mouth had receded, but it was bleeding into her cheeks and making her eyelids heavy. Her brain was feeling disconnected and her bruises were rising up through the veils to make themselves known.

"He's a soldier's soldier. He's so very good at tactical manoeuvring, almost like he can foresee outcomes. He is absolutely tenacious; he has courage beyond anything I can describe; he'd do anything for his men. Things along that line. He's the sort of man you go in to fight for, knowing he's planning to win. He hates to lose. I trust his judgment.

"But outside of a battle, he shows no emotion. None. He's completely closed to everyone except the one or two people who've know him differently. And he hates women."

"Sounds like a soldier."

"Not 'sounds like a Roman'?"

"No." She shrugged. "All soldiers. Most men. A few days ago I would have said all men." She smiled. "What sort of soldier were you?"

"Cavalry. Auxiliary *alae*. Attached to the Twentieth all the time I was enlisted."

"That's not what I meant. I meant, were you a soldier's soldier? I know you miss it. In that way at least you're like my brother. He can't stand sitting around doing nothing. He'd rather have a war going on than not." Her tongue was getting less articulate and her thoughts slower. She looked around for water and reached for the box of medicine bottles.

He frowned and rubbed thoughtfully at his palms. "I don't know if I prefer a war. I have no problem with fighting or killing. I follow orders; I'm not keen to give them. I prefer fighting men who fight back, when someone wins and someone loses. And I hate dealing with battles I can't hope to win, when I can do nothing but watch and feel helpless. I'll take a bloody war over that any day."

"Then you're not so different after all." All the euphoria of her luncheon had blurred into fatigue and dull aching fogs. Marc was a Roman soldier. The son of a soldier, from the farthest edges of Britannia. Not an exiled noble. Even if he really was the only man who might ever accept her, no one in her family would ever accept him.

Or forgive her.

His secrets couldn't change the future, it was just as bleak as it had been that morning. "I need to rest. Can I lay down on this here?" Twisting, she pointed down behind the seat to the open wad of bedding.

He held her hand as she stepped over the seat and down into the open tray of the wagon. His hand was warm, strong and steady, but it didn't matter. And it didn't matter if he looked like the sun and smelled like safety. She braced her hand protectively over the hardness in her abdomen as she knelt. None of it made the least bit of difference.

The bedding was soft enough against the jostle of the wagon, and she was shaded from the sun by the seat above as she made herself comfortable. The poets wrote about men who loved like that, men who loved a woman more than they loved their own lives. But she'd learned not to believe in those sweet stories.

Women loved. Men fought. And the future was bleak and empty.

When she opened her eyes again the sky was past silver, and she lay looking up into the high streaked dome of fading light. Her dreams had offered no new hopes. If she dreamt at all. Her bladder was nagging and she pulled her feet around under her so she could kneel behind and beside where Marc sat.

"Ah good," he said. "How much comfort do you want tonight? We can camp with the caravan or stay at a roadhouse. It's your choice."

She pushed her fingers through her hair until it felt tidier, and answered, "Roadhouse. Or an inn. I need some hot water and a bed. There's a nice clean inn just past the fort when we get closer to the township."

He reached a hand back to help her stand. "Do you know this road?"

"Yes. I lived in Numantia for a few years. I travelled up and down each month."

"That's good. For tonight at least. From tomorrow, we'll have to avoid any places where you would usually have stayed. If they come looking, they're the places they'll start."

The inn was a low 'U' shaped complex around an open courtyard full of fruit trees, with stables running down the length of the outer wall. The rooms were joined by a covered walkway, which opened to the centre where trestle tables clustered under the trees. Marc carried the possessions Marella had chosen to her room and returned to the stables. When he'd tended the mules and his saddle horse, he sauntered to a table and sat resting his head on his crossed arms.

Marella bathed and checked the progress of her injuries. The bruises on her stomach and thighs were dark purple and the edges frayed into sickly green grey. Her breasts felt heavy and they were sore to touch. She pulled a clean *tunica* down over the dark stains on her flesh and chose a light silk *palla* to cover the marks on her arms and throat, then walked out to find Marc.

"I asked for more hot water," she said as she perched onto a wooden stool. "You can wash and I'll have the boy bring hot food to this table, or we can eat in the dining hall there." She pointed at the main front room of the inn.

"I want to eat, that's all. I'm going to ride up to the camp and talk to some of the caravan guards."

Concerns Marella couldn't recognize shadowed his face and her pulse skipped over unknown dangers. "Why?"

"We don't know how long it will take for your sister to find out you lied to her. Maybe one day, maybe two. And we don't know how she'll take that news, but by tomorrow, we'll need to start worrying about who's coming after us.

"Tomorrow night we'll make Nertobriga. The next, Bilbilis. I don't know much about them, but they're bigger cities so they're easier to disappear in, and they're Roman. The wagons will be evaluated for tariffs, but if we go in separately we shouldn't draw anyone's attention."

Fatigue smudged his features and Marella clasped her hands together in her lap to hide their shake. "Should I be worried?"

"Are you?"

She nodded, waiting for him to smile and make her fears seem foolish.

"I want to find a way to break up our profile. If riders come through looking for us, they'll have my description and they'll be looking for a couple. I'll go tonight to see who'll take cash to give us some cover."

Whatever he had planned it made no sense to her. But the realization he was leaving her alone at the inn, even with its rooms full of travellers, left her feeling isolated and exposed.

"Do you know how far those girls are travelling, or where they're staying?" he asked.

Her breath shortened and a hot rash itched in the skin at the back of her neck, creeping up to heat her cheeks. She twitched a smile that refused to stay on her mouth. "Okilis, for the *Samhain* festival. I don't know where they're staying. Why?"

"I'm just trying to put pieces together in my head. Let's eat out here, it's crowded in there. Too many strangers."

Turning to catch the eye of one of the boys standing ready at the main entrance portico, Marella raised a slim hand. As soon as the boy moved toward them, she pulled it back below the table, twisting the soft silk of her wrap into knots. "Will you be coming back here tonight?"

He frowned, deep in thought and began to answer. "Aye." When he paused to look clearly at her, a smile started in his eyes. "Are you concerned for my morals? Or do you think I still need an enticement to stay?"

"No, neither." She looked down at her hands, trying to straighten the creases she'd made in the silk. "I'm afraid of being left alone here. You didn't take a room and I don't feel safe unless I know you're nearby."

"Well there's a change. When did I move from danger to protector?"

She shrugged and kept smoothing the fabric down her thigh. "How will I know when you get back? Don't mock me. I'm doing my best."

“Aye, you are.” He smiled. “I’ll sleep in the wagon with the gear. If you want, I’ll come and tell you when I get back.”

A tray of roasted meat and vegetables was placed in front of them as she said quietly, “Yes. Do that.” The child piled food onto two plates and set them one each, and she looked up, pleading. “I can have hot water ready, if you like? I can redress your wound? Suelta has myrrh.”

For long moments he searched her face, his pale scrutiny burning like a touch on her cheek. There was no trace of humour in the intensity of his gaze and she felt her chest tighten and her heartbeat rush and stutter.

Dark fears crowded her lungs and stopped her breath, pushing the tenderness in her breasts against their soft bindings. Once again she saw his calm certainty; saw him challenge and dismiss any reasoning she gave him.

“All right.”

The simple answer was like a claxon, triggering responses that ran roughshod all over her body. Tremors set in her elbows and at her nape, making the supper an impossible task. Her heartbeat kicked a pulse into her stomach and groin that made her want to pull her knees up to her chest. There were things she wanted to say, explanations, but every time she met the stone clarity of his eyes, the words dried on her tongue.

When he left to saddle his horse, she walked quickly to her room, barred the door and lay on the hard pallet. Nervous tension was twisting what she’d eaten of her meal into a knot of nausea, and her skin flushed hot and cold with anticipation.

It was beyond reason. She had offered no more than water to bathe and a dressing for his injury, and yet his eyes said she had intended more. She hadn’t. She'd made that mistake before.

And he had accepted no more. He'd made his feelings on the subject plain. But her body trembled with possibilities. Her flesh was alive with promises, gooseflesh rising like the thrill of panic when the soft fabric of her wrap slipped over her skin.

There was no reason in it and no hope.

It didn’t matter if he was the man she might once have dreamed about. She was no longer a child and life had led her too far from the dreams of a child. She wasn’t sure she could remember who that child had been, before all her dreams became nightmares from which she could never wake.

Beside her, the turned ironwork grill in the open window blurred between the brilliant stars. The dark moon offered no competition; there would be a new moon for *Samhain*. New hope, beginnings, birth, and abundance. In the hours she had stared after their slow march, the stars and the gods had been silent. The goddess herself may have been sleeping, because there was no way there would be new hope in this New Year.

Tapping startled her from the sleepless reverie of fatigue. She had trimmed the lamp low and shadows loomed large against the walls, making her feel small and afraid. Childlike. A second knock, harder, hit her chest like a blow, shoving her pulse up hard into her throat.

She couldn’t speak.

“Marella.” The word made her jump, hot and cold shocked together under her skin and she pushed trembling hands down over her hips as she stood to open the door. Her three slow steps jarred, and the hand that rose to lift the bar was shaking.

As the door cracked open, it carried the warm smell of him on a tide of cool air. Leaning on the jamb, the dark night framed his shoulders as the poor lamplight picked gold from his skin. “Did I wake you?” He shifted his weight back and raised a hand to

push the door open. Her legs had frozen, and he turned sideways, his hands on her arms as he brushed past her and into the room.

"No."

His back was to the lamp, but from the shadows the pale heat in his eyes caught hers and held them. He pushed the door closed and moved to lean against it, his hands pressed to the wood behind his hips.

"It's too late for water," she said. The words were dry in her mouth and she touched her tongue to her lips. "It's there, and a bowl, but it's cold by now." Her hand moved vaguely toward the washstand, but her eyes stayed fixed on his.

"That's all right. I bathed."

Slowly her gaze slid down over his body. A short tunic caught across his chest, sleeveless, with a deep placket running from his throat to his belly. The air seemed thin, her chest laboured over every breath as her eyes travelled down. A wide leather belt cinched the rough woven wool of a dark kilt, its masses of pleats caught together over one hip.

She dragged her eyes up, and felt her tender breasts tighten against the silk of her *tunica*. "Then why have you come?"

"For my anointing, priestess." He was mocking her again. Laughter sparkled in the depths of his eyes. Had he bathed? He smelled clean, masculine. Then where? When? There were bathhouses in the township. Or had he found the slaver's daughters and come back to share the story?

Her hands worked silently at her side and she licked her lips again, pulling her eyes from his, studying the floor at her feet. "I'm not a child." Air was rushing in her ears and it took a moment to realize she'd spoken the words aloud.

"No you're not."

"And I'm not a fool." She met his gaze with the beginning of determination. "I offered to dress your wound, that's all." Her determination wasn't strong. The moisture that had left her mouth pooled in her eyes and she blinked tears away before they could rally.

"That's right." He pushed forward, stepping past her so the smell of his skin danced around her in swirls on the air. He lifted the lamp and slid back the gate to raise the flame. "Aloes and myrrh, honey and cider, rose water and asses cream." Turning back to face her, he lifted his tunic over his head. "Physician, I am in your hands." He smiled so she almost forgot her fear, but his pale eyes were darker and they held hers like a prize.

Hoisting the small wooden box of medicines onto the bed, he sat beside it, rested back onto his elbows and waited, taut as a mountain lynx.

A small noise seeped from her throat where a groan of despair met the sigh of desire. Her fingers ached to reach for him, but curled into her palm as if they feared the snap of a trap. They straightened and curled, unconsciously bunching and lifting her dress, willing it to climb her thighs and free her to kneel onto the bed, to press him back, to let her lips touch his.

She could feel his eyes on her as he read each thought, discounted her denials and smiled in silent certainty at her longing. But there wasn't a smile on his mouth. His jaw was too tight, his lips were parted over heavy breath and his eyes were dark mirrors. When she forced her knees to bend and made herself move forward, it was toward a shadow of her own tense desire. He matched her yearning and it rippled in every hard muscle in his chest and stomach.

"I won't need *acetum*." Her words were too hoarse, and she cleared her throat, pain furrowing her brows as she studied the impossibility of her situation. There was no

way to calm the trembling in her fingers as she reached to slip the end of the bandage free and began to unwind. The way he was laying forced her to lift her *tunica* and lean onto a knee beside him. Her hair fell forward in a silky veil and her breasts strained into the sheer fabric of her dress. Her nipples ached and her knee trembled under her weight.

"I can't." She stepped back. "Don't. I know. This isn't. It's you." Wiping loose hair back behind her ears with an angry hand, she backed away from him as he sat up. Laughter was growing in his eyes and soft lips smiled over perfect teeth.

"None of that made sense. Try again, slowly."

"I said stop it. You know what I mean. If you want ointments, they're right there. You do it yourself."

"Okay." He chuckled and raised a hand in surrender. "But you did offer."

Exasperation joined the tremors in her hands and knees. "You're all the same."

"Who?" He looked up from the medicine box, the same infuriating grin that made her want to laugh with him turned on her like a beam of light. "Men or soldiers or Romans? Celts? Caledonians?"

He rubbed a line of greasy mare's cream ointment over the length of the cut, placed a clean dressing against it and stood, motioning with his eyes for her to wrap the bandage.

"You know what I mean." She stepped forward, quickly binding clean linen strips in place. "You already look like the cat that got the cream. Have you been out whoring with the di Sicoris girls?"

"That's harsh. A nobler man might refuse to answer that. A man who owns or uses or despises women. But I'm just a peasant." He touched his forehead and ducked his head, laughing. "No. I hoped you'd think me smarter than that."

"Hmmm," she tucked the bandage end in tight and looked up into his face. "I can't look at you like this. Like that." She pointed to the bed where they had been. There was no place for him in her future. He deserved better. The way he made her feel could not matter. She held his tunic up against the warm tension of his chest. "Here. Go. Sleep. Get drunk. Good night."

He caught her hand in the soft fabric of his tunic and held it against himself. Gentle fingers reached to tangle in her hair, and the piercing blue of his eyes met hers. "I'm the one who likes good wine, remember. Sip," he touched his lips to hers and the breath she'd held groaned against them, "and savour."

He dropped his hands to his side and turned back to the door. From over his shoulder, he said, "If you decide you do still want to pay me in flesh, I'm good to go." His grin wrenched her heart and made her smile over the lip she bit. "No witnesses, no scandal. Just keep an eye on the time." He winked at her and walked out into the moonless night.

Her hands locked like guardians over the cramping mound of her belly. Beside her in the medicine chest, the vials of silphium and gentiane waited for the day they reached Numantia. Dark in its wrapping of moss lay the alkanet root she would peel and use as an abortifacient pessary.

Her longings had woken the child and it filled her womb with slow heavy warmth. It was crying out for its life. Crying out to remind her she was human, a woman, a mother-never-to-be. She rushed to snap down the lid of the box as if hiding the vials would hide her intention from her child.

She would have to abort the infant. There was nothing else she could do. What she wanted couldn't matter. If she could run from the scandal to live in Valentia, the temple was her only refuge. But not if she carried a child with her at the breast.

She was alone. Again. Alone with choices that would break her heart. Muting the lamp, she barred the door and lay back onto the hard pallet, thinking about her golden peasant. And the awful rush of time.

[top]

CHAPTER TEN.

Marella was distant, caught up in complex issues he didn't understand and didn't want to know about. Her codes and honours confused and infuriated him. Ten minutes, he decided silently to himself, ten minutes it would take his father to explain the simple truths they'd lived by.

She intended to die for the prejudices of men who saw her as either a prize or a threat. Even if she survived, she would hide all that soft beauty in a rough woollen cassock and douse those smouldering eyes with bitter altar wine.

Ten minutes. But he didn't have his father's eloquence.

The wagons were slowing to the bank of the Jalon River to break for midday when they were both jolted from their musings. Horsemen cantered wide on the grassed verges. There were six of them mounted on Taran's deep-chested greys. They wore the same dark blue jerkins, mail and leggings as the *equites* he'd seen in Caesaraugusta, the same golden torcs at their throats. All six wore broad blades across their backs and gilt daggers shone in the calf strap of their boots. They slowed, casting half interested glances over the caravan, then gained the clear road ahead and stretched the horses back to full stride.

"*Equites*?" he asked the air, not needing a response.

"Yes."

The horses had run hard. Shaking his head to force the numbers clearer, he calculated their journey. They must have left Caesaraugusta last night, or early this morning. He looked at Marella, uncertain whether to mourn her sister-in-law aloud. "They can't run those horses much further. If they can get another hour out of them, they'll gain Nertobriga. That's outside your brother's control, so they'll have to rest up tonight and keep going themselves in the morning. They can't relay the message without new riders."

"Okay," she whispered. "What will they do?"

"I don't know. If I had my brother here, he'd give you a good guess. That's why he had command and not me. I don't guess. I just decide what we'll do instead."

She turned dark eyes so full of fear and need up to him, his heart clenched in his chest. There were too many ways this could go. Too many incalculables. Too many ways they could fail.

"There's a guard up there who will drive the wagon for me. I'll ride. You need to go reacquaint yourself with the ladies." As he spoke, they slowed to a halt in the lush green grass of the riverbank. "You'll be safe enough travelling with them, safer than this, anyway. If troops come back looking for a couple, they might be thrown long enough for us to get past them."

"Troops? Roman troops?"

"Aye," he answered. "If there are any still sober. If we can get through to Nertobriga, we can change caravans, change wagons, change direction if you want to. But we have to get past this first screen."

She searched his face; the tiny smile that haunted the corners of her mouth flicked uncertainly, as if she was using his confidence as her own.

“If I disappear for a while, don’t panic. I’ll get back. But if anything at all goes wrong, you sit silent and keep yourself under cover, understand. You stay with those girls all the way to Okilis if you have to. You can run back to Numantia with the crowds after the *Samhain* celebrations. Got it?”

She nodded, swallowing hard, and he longed to hold her against him. The bruises on her throat and down her chest, where the soft skin of her full breasts disappeared into the rose pink of her *tunica,* only served to underline her courage.

He leapt into the grass and held up a hand to help her step down. When she stood beside him, she kept his hand in hers, looking up with quiet desperation. “You’re right. If I stay with these girls, if I find out who to pay to drive the *carra,* I can get there myself.” She brought her other hand up to hold his, and he pressed his free fingers against her lips.

“You don’t want to go through all that again, do you? Besides, I’ve never worked for true nobility before. Never will again.”

“This isn’t a game,” she hissed, her dark eyes searching his, pooling with frustration. “If you stay here the Romans will kill you. Run, while you still can.”

“I don’t want to run.” Old pressures were rising in his gorge and her tight grip on his fingers, the soft depth of her eyes, stoked the fires in his skin.

“You ran from your tribune before. Go again now,” she begged.

“That was different. I wasn’t running away from him.”

“How was it different then? You’re making excuses.”

“No. Then I didn’t want to kill him. That limited my options. He wasn’t going to play games.”

He smiled as resignation softened her expression and she shook her head. “You’re too stubborn. Live. Die. Who am I to say? It’s your choice.”

When the caravan resumed its march, Marc rode wide and to the rear. They’d meet cavalry coming back in the next hour. If infantry was sent, not for another two, maybe three hours.

The valley itself was unforgiving, staunch buttresses and flat floodplain, and only very occasional patches of dense forestry clumped against foothills. It was the only cover he could he hope for and it was too sparse to be reliable.

But the river bowed and curved back on itself, stretching the road ahead into a long ribbon running off to the left, and that gave him a preview of the approaching riders. Catching a hiss between his teeth, he cantered wide, keeping the bulk of the vehicles between himself and the mounted Romans.

There was no more than a small thicket for cover, but he dismounted there, crouching in thorns and twigs as the caravan slowed and a vehicle-to-vehicle search began. For more than an hour the legionaries moved back and forth, sweeping forward and back, deliberately retracing their steps. Whatever their orders had been, whatever reason they were given for searching, they were making damnably sure he didn’t get past them.

Wiping sweat from his eyes, he mumbled a plea, if not to a god then to Marella herself to stay calm and let the searchers pass. When they did and the caravan resumed its ponderous course, he breathed in relief, found a patch of ground free of prickles and lay back in the sand to wait. If the horsemen had not doubled back on them in an hour, he’d ride wide, cling to the foothills where he could, and catch the caravan at the gates of Nertobriga.

Once the caravan had been released to continue, Marella accepted a flask of wine, swaddling her hand in the filmy wrap of her *palla* to hide its shake. The searchers had

passed with the girls around her making ribald comments and obscene offers to the Romans. That may have saved her skin in the end, but it made her stomach heave.

Marc had, as he'd predicted, disappeared.

Their brightly curtained *carpentum* shaded her from the sun, but it blocked cooling breezes and her view of the road behind. Pouring a long, sweet draft of wine into her mouth, she whispered prayers to the goddess and to his wolf to keep him safe.

The hours to Nertobriga and the cool cover of darkness seemed interminable.

Once inside the city walls, the caravan wound its way through the lower levels, avoiding the cramped spaces of the market square. Without direction the girl's driver turned aside, pushing his team up through narrow streets to an unfamiliar inn, and Marella fought the ghosts of isolation and exposure. She had done as Marc told her, and when she stepped down into the darkening courtyard, she was relieved to find his chosen guard had followed with their wagon.

She grabbed the arm of a servant boy as he rushed to carry his mistress' comforts to their rooms. Holding out a small bag of coins, she said, "Take this to the man in that wagon. Tell him thank you, his job is finished." Before the frightened boy could run, she said, "There's another purse for the person who tends my mules and keeps watch on my possessions tonight." The child's eyes lit and he ran in the direction of Marella's wagon.

Following the girls, she arranged a room for herself with a large tub, then joined them for their ongoing party.

Marc watched the gate as the night settled around him. Stragglers still entered the city, most receiving no more than a cursory glance from the guards stationed at the wall. When he saw what he needed, he jogged from the shadows to fall in behind a small group of riders.

Inside the city walls, he followed the general flow of traffic into the market precinct, selected a decrepit stall that wore its provenance proudly, and asked directions to the inn the di Sicoris family were said to be using.

In the crowded darkness of the city, directions were not easy to follow. Streets wound up terraces, following an ancient pattern that had not been renovated by the Roman love of grids, but at last he found the building. Clinging to the shadows around the outside wall, checking through barred, unshuttered windows, eventually he had the room.

He crossed his arms on the wide stone sill and watched for a few moments before he chose to speak. She was beautiful. Her hair was caught up in a loose twist that spilled fine strands down to curl and stick against the smooth cream skin of her shoulders. Even the bruises, so cruel in contrast, could only underline the sublimely elegant lines of her body. "You should close the shutters when you bathe," he said quietly.

Shock splashed from the tub as Marella dropped against her knees and spun a horrified glare at the open window. "What are you doing there?" she shrieked, casting about urgently for something she could use to cover her body. Her bath sheet and clothes lay draped over a stool in a nearby corner. But not near enough.

"Watching you." Part of him, the part who still heard his mother's voice, the part that warned him when he'd had enough to drink, the part that said move back and let her dress, squalled in the back of his mind. But as always, he ignored it. "I'm not in any hurry if you want to finish what you're doing."

Part of him, the part that was physical and male and alone, had no need for words. It groaned painfully through his flesh, burning from the pit of his stomach into his groin and up under his ribs so he struggled for breath.

“Marc, don’t. I told you. Where have you been? I was worried.” There was enough honest concern in her words to make him smile.

“Walk over here and tell me how much you missed me,” he grinned. Let me see you stand. Turn slow circles so I can see every part of you. Like a man stepping in from an arid desert sun, he longed to soak in her softness and quench an aching thirst. Heat rolled up between his shoulder blades, burning in his throat until he dropped his forehead onto his arms and let a small moan slip through his nose.

“Marc, please. If you don’t move around here and come to the door, I’m going to start yelling.” Her eyes didn’t share his amusement.

“Ah Marella, you’re a dangerous woman. If you yell, we’re both dead. But it might be worth the price if you’ll just stand up.” He chuckled to himself at her curses, and moved down the side of the inn, past stables that ran in staggered lines, and back to the front of the building.

Passing down the corridor between wings, he counted off doors and knocked. When it opened there was no more amusement in her than had been there a moment ago. “Get in here,” she snapped. “Where were you? I didn’t know where you were or what to do.” There was fear and relief in her dark eyes, her arched brows crowding together in a frown of agitation.

“Yes you did. I told you what to do. Stay with these girls.” He turned and sat on the edge of the bed, enjoying the chance to watch her walking around. Her breeding had made her a dancer, her simple movements graceful and mesmerizing. “Last night I found out where they would be staying, here and in Bilbilis. If I hadn’t caught up with you by then, you’re on your own anyway.”

She’d dragged an unbleached fine linen *tunica* over her moist skin, and the fabric slid into patches of damp translucence. The unformed shift let her full breasts sit lower, and the dark shadow of her nipples stayed at the edge of his vision as he tried to fix his gaze on her face.

“Is there food?” he asked.

Marella groaned and pushed her fingers back through the kinked gloss of her hair. “Next door. They’ve got a whole buffet in there.” She strode past him and the sweet citrus blossom smell of her skin teased his lips. “I’ll have to dress again and go back in.” The prospect didn’t please her and she snatched a heavy *palla* from her trunk.

“That’s all right.” He smiled. “I can go in. I’d like to thank the girls for keeping you safe.”

Her glare melted him to the spot. “I’ll go,” she said distinctly. “You have a wash. I can call for clean water.”

Catching the hand she swept through her hair, he pulled her closer and kissed the back of her fingers. They were cool against the heat of his lips, cool and fragrant, and the touch rolled his stomach into a clench that pushed the air from his chest. He could have drawn her closer, pulled her near and buried his face against her stomach. “I’d prefer the water you left.”

The sound in her throat was a growl, intended to intimidate him into silence, but he winced like she’d licked the sweat from his chest and he smiled when she snatched her hand back. “You’re infuriating. If I could only remember the words, I’d ....” She turned to the door, then back and fixed her heated gaze on him. “If you get in that tub you make sure you’re done by the time I get back.”

Marc touched his hand to his brow and grinned. Aches and strains from the journey had etched deep into his back and shoulders and the water was still hot enough to insist he soak. The tub had a higher back and was long enough to fit most of his legs into. It was a chance he couldn’t waste.

Marella had closed the shutters.

"Too late." He laughed and pressed the door closed, but didn't hang the bar. He dragged the stool within reach of the tub, picked her damp bath sheet from the floor and loosed the pins from his belt so the heavy kilt dropped to the ground. Piling his tunic, kilt and towel onto the stool, he peeled off the dressing and studied the progress of his wound.

Most of its length was pink with new skin, the fine neat lips of the cut already meeting to heal. The place where it passed up onto his ribs, he judged, had probably needed stitching. The edges were red and raw, dragged apart by the moving muscle underneath, but there was no darkness or smell to signal putrefaction.

He stepped into the sweet water, lay back and closed his eyes. This new life was not so bad. He'd had worse.

Marella carried a flask of wine and led a young servant back to the room. She moved to knock, but the door swung open at her touch. Milky water around his hips was as close to decency as Marc could claim and he lay with his head back on the edge of the tub, his eyes closed.

"Put that there." She motioned abruptly for the serving girl to place the tray of food onto the pallet, then waited impatiently for her to leave the room.

"Why are you still in there?"

"Let me soak a while. I promise I won't make any sudden movements." He hadn't even opened his eyes, and Marella found a smile curling onto her lips as he rolled the heavily accented drawl from his tongue. She was annoyed. And relieved.

Checking her hair and straightening her wrap against the fear of looking as dishevelled as she felt, she carried the tray of food to where he could reach. "Food, my lord?"

He grinned at the contemptuous sneer she drew into the words, but remained where he lay. "Better and better. Do you do a shave, wench?"

"No I do not."

He turned his head and opened one eye just enough to wink at her. "Ah well. I thought it was too good to be true." Coming to life, he reached for the tray and balanced it between his chest and his thighs. Droplets caught the lamplight like jewels on his golden skin, sparkling and rolling down the hard contours of his chest. While he ate, she poured a goblet of wine and handed it in to the tub.

"Did you hear anything from our Roman friends while they were searching?" he asked.

Marella moved the rising tide of nervous warmth in her belly to the edge of the bed behind him and carefully took a seat. The ends of his hair were damp and curled into ringlets where a fine spray of freckles crossed his broad shoulders. A short scar dimpled the skin above one shoulder blade, and her thumb pressed over fingertips that longed to trace over its smooth arc and to learn its history.

"No." She pulled her eyes from his back and studied her own fingers. "The girls were making crude offers again. The noises the soldiers made had nothing to do with orders. But they were looking for you. They didn't even mention me. Or any other female. It was you they wanted."

The blue lines of his tattoo traced intricate triangles, linked and locked and unbroken, and the muscle in his upper back made small movements under his skin, sinuous and sensual as a cat.

"Ahuh." He nodded to himself and she knew his full lips had gathered in a pout of indifference, even though his face was turned away. "Did you see their colours? The insignia on their uniforms?"

“I don’t know what you mean.” She stood, stepped closer to her study of the blue lines on his skin, and a wave of heat spread from her stomach down her thighs, pooled in her knees and ran down into weakening ankles.

“On their shields, maybe on their saddles? An animal. Some way to identify the legion they’re attached to. If they’re local, they were being very thorough. I don’t want to find there’s a vexillation from the Twentieth looking for me all over the colonies.”

“I didn’t see any insignia. I was crammed up in the back of the *carpentum*, hoping they wouldn’t call me out. But they didn’t have an accent I could make out. I'd have said they were local.”

Her finger moved to trace a line down the centre of his shoulder and onto the top of his arm. It slipped over the wet skin, skidding over the bumps and ridges where blue lines met and crossed the centre.

The smell of his wet hair rose like perfume, mixed and sweetened by the fragrance of the bath salts. It flooded her body with warmth that centred low in her stomach and washed into her limbs like the weakness of contentment or sheer terror. It made her hands shake and her breath short.

He laid his head back on the edge of the tub and looked up at her. “Did you want to change the subject?”

Answers formed easily enough in her mind, but none of them made it to her mouth. She shook her head. Warm longing was growing in her loins, spreading from the innocent life she carried, daring her to reach again, to feel the hard perfection of his body. “You watched them search?”

“Aye.”

“Then you know how carefully they went through that caravan. You knew it was you they wanted, the Romans. You know what you’ll face if they find you.”

“Aye.” He turned his head to follow her as she moved slowly around the tub.

“But you still came back? You still came to find me?”

“Aye.”

It was the simple answer she expected. She wanted to ask why he would take such a risk for her, but she’d tried that route with him before. Dropping his pile of clothes to the floor, she pulled the stool closer and turned to sit where she could see his face.

“I didn’t know if they’d found you. If you were coming back. If you were dead,” she said quietly. “And I haven’t told you everything.” Stubble glinted copper and gold on his chin. He’d come back. She had feared him, insulted him, used him in so many ways and yet he’d come back. For her.

“I didn’t think you had. I don’t really care.” The blue in his eyes was as clear as a summer sky. “You keep staring at me and asking yourself where I came from and why I’m here. Tying it all up in knots like it’s the riddle of the universe. But it really is very simple.”

“It isn’t,” she said, rubbing her mouth with her fingertips to keep her tongue from reaching to lick the heat in them. “It couldn’t be simple. It’s your life you’re risking. For a stranger.”

“But it is simple.” He smiled and her heart drew the blood from her face. She wanted to beg him to shut up and hear what she had to say before she lost the courage to speak. She was too late. “My father would say ‘it’s better to die for something than to live for nothing. And it’s better to live for something than to die for nothing’. I don’t know why you ended up on my doorstep. But you did. That’s reason enough.”

Marella groaned. She couldn’t guess what the knowledge of her pregnancy would mean to him or how he would react. How could he guess the weights on her choices?

How could he ever choose if he didn't know the whole story? But if they were caught, if they both died tomorrow, would any of it matter?

If he went his own way tomorrow, would any of it matter?

She put her hands out to reach for the tray, and he fixed his eyes on her like she was an adder as he handed it up. The steady gaze that scraped her delusions away and left her truths naked before him dried her questions into a hot ball in her throat. Would it matter if he walked away? "That's reason enough? Still? Is it?" It was too hard to meet his eyes.

He nodded. Before she lifted it away, he snatched his wine goblet back. "Can I have some more?"

"You don't know what you're asking."

"I'm asking for wine," he said, his face as straight as a death mask, and for the first time that night she laughed. The sound of it burst like bubbles in her chest and her smile slid away.

"I have nowhere safe to go, Marc. I'm still looking for desperate solutions."

His fingers flicked through the milky water, and he studied them like an oracle reading the ripples. "You can't buy solutions from me. I've got nothing to give you. Not even promises. I don't own any tomorrows." That was his prediction.

She held the flask as steady as she could and poured wine into his glass, then watched him sip the dark red liquid over his lips. "I'm still afraid of you," she said quietly. His eyes were on her, she could feel them as she studied each tiny hair in the stubble at the corner of his mouth.

"I can see that." He looked up from under his brows. "You're sitting in a room far away from everyone you know, next to a naked man who thinks you are exquisite, dancing around offers you can't take back. You have every reason to be afraid."

Desperate laughter stuttered up into her mouth. "Should I laugh at fear? Should I drink and laugh and die tomorrow, contented?"

"That's a noble sentiment, m'lady. The sort of thing an officer might say. Don't forget my breeding." When he spoke there was no hint of humour in his words and his deep voice was soft and soothing. It was his last warning.

"I won't." She smiled. "I'll forget mine."

Stepping as bravely as she could past the point of no return, Marella moved to trim the lamp. With trembling fingers, she slid the tiny gate in to close the surface of the oil. But before it slid completely home, she thought better of it, and sat it back on its shelf, leaving it to throw a dim light through the room. She was as she was, bruises and damage and all. And he was beautiful. Right or wrong, what she wanted to do she would want to remember, in every detail, for as long as she lived.

Facing the wall to keep the pain in her eyes away from his piercing scrutiny, she asked, "Will we die tomorrow?"

He laughed softly and she heard him stand. Cascades fell around him like the crash of breaking glass, too loud in her hypersensitive ears. Her own breath dragged in and out like a bellows and she dropped her face, crushing her nails into her palms to keep herself from laughing or crying.

"There are worse things that could happen." He stood behind her, close enough to feel the heat of his chest on her shoulders. His fingertip brushed the skin of her arm and a fire of greed and terror burst along her nerves.

She turned, looking up into his face. "That's what I'm afraid of."

His fingers slipped across her cheeks, combing into her hair and drawing her lips up to his. His kiss was light, the touch of uncertainty, of feeling through questions of dreams and reality and she answered with as much assurance as she could find.

Marella stepped forward, reaching to touch the wet heat of his chest, slipping her fingertips down his belly and out to surround him and pull him against her. His flesh was burning, hard and wet and her breasts ached as they pressed into him. She stretched, arching her back as she stood on her toes to reach his mouth. He tasted like honeyed wine; he was hot and golden as the sun and she melted like a snowflake on his tongue.

All the fears and uncertainties she had walled up in rules, all the rights and wrongs she'd held between them, seemed insubstantial and a long way off. He was warm and gentle, surrounding her with calm strength and she felt safer wrapped in his embrace than she ever had behind her family's high stone walls.

When he stepped back, she followed. Closing her eyes against the burn of tears she let him lead her to the bed. Trembling weakened her arms and legs, but it was a delicious terror that only his touch could soothe. Where their bodies touched, her skin burned like lava breaking through a mantle. Part of her mind whispered harsh warnings, but her heart and her body no longer cared.

Or about tomorrow.

Or about death.

She had all the life she needed as her flesh awoke under his touch. The wet cloth of her dress dragged on her skin as it slipped down and his lips followed his fingers over her shoulders. She groaned in precious agony as his palm cupped her naked breast. The soft touch of his thumb against her aching nipple forced a whimper, but when he sucked it into the hot velvet of his mouth, rolled it against the slippery stroke of his tongue, he sent ecstatic tremors from the heat of her womb.

The dreams of a child could not paint such tenderness. Marella closed her eyes and drew his gentle strength into herself. She nourished her soul on the sweet taste of him, and let the silken textures of his skin caress and soothe every sore part of her body and her heart.

She had learned her role as a woman was to give pleasure to her lover, to let him take. And in nightmares the Druid had ripped his abhorrent gratification from her flesh.

But this was nothing she'd ever known.

Without caring for the privilege of rank or position, Marc carried her into the realms of divinity, worshipping her body with his. Stroking and caressing her to ecstasies she'd never imagined. His mouth whispered against her ear in hot breath that lifted fire from her skin and raised languid smiles from her lips. That same mouth drew waves of fierce pleasure rolling out from the burn of an intimate kiss, where his tongue stroked her to explosive climax.

She touched her lips to his, studying the catch in his features as she settled slowly onto him, letting the urgent heat of his erection fill her. Rhythmically, she rolled the muscles deep in her pelvis and drew groans of pleasure from him as she licked the rash of sweat from his throat.

Marella felt no need to rush. She had memorized every line of his tattoo as she searched the skin of his chest. She sucked at his nipples and learned the taste of every part of him. They could stretch an eternity into pleasure or torture and not know the difference. She had no need for tomorrow, or even yesterday. She was blissfully safe and warm in Marc's arms, and she needed to know nothing else.

They made love. And they slept.

How many times they woke and skin brushed over skin or lips moved slowly over flesh, she couldn't say. She was instantly addicted to the smell and the taste and the feel of him. When they woke, when they touched, they made love again. And again. Until nothing short of thunder clash could hope to wake them.

The thunder came at dawn.

The bang shocked through her enough to make her reach out, but until she felt the empty space beside her, she kept her eyes closed. Straining to force them open, she peered around the early morning gloom.

Marc was dressing.

When he noticed her movement he walked back to the bed and stretched out to lie beside her. “Good morning, noble lady.” In the morning light, the bruises around her throat and down her ribs and abdomen screamed from her pale skin. He closed his eyes and buried his face against the junction of her neck and shoulder.

“Will it be a good morning? What’s all that noise?” Her fingers knotted themselves in the hair at the base of his skull, massaging absently.

“Most of it is thunder. Something else is going on out there. I don’t know what it is yet.” It was trouble, some sort of argument.

“Searchers?”

He shrugged. Information could be being beaten out of reluctant men, but there was no point worrying her with speculation. No one from the caravan and no one from the inn knew he was here. Urgent tensions had sprung into her flesh at the thought; he could feel the tremble in her fingertips and the rapid shallow breaths she drew.

“I want to go out and look around,” he said.

“Stay here,” she whispered. “Can’t we just stay here and forget about everything else?”

“Stay here and wait for them to come in?” he asked.

Fear had given way to hopelessness in her dark eyes. He’d seen the same look in the eyes of men who were exhausted by fear. When the stresses of battle went on day after day, without a break, and the chance of success seemed too small and much too far away.

She didn’t answer.

There was hope, there was always hope. He just had to find it for her. “No we can’t.” Her hair spread across the pillow, her eyes were deep pools, warm and dark and pleading. There was too much spirit, too much sparkling brilliance to surrender. “It’s not so bad,” he said. “We know as much about where they are as they know about us. We may only need to change caravans. If we can get past them here, they’ll be guessing. There are too many people on the roads now to search everyone.”

“And go where?” she asked, her voice breaking over the question. Tears flooded and ran in unbroken lines from the corners of her eyes, back to glisten in her hair.

Numantia, he thought. More than exhaustion filled the lovely contours of her face. More than fear, more than hopelessness. There was desperation that had fallen into despair. “Okay. What’s changed?”

There was only one thing that had changed and that was that she was lying naked beside him. What had changed was her attitude to him; it was no longer fearful contempt. Her dedication to her vows of celibacy had faltered, and honestly, he didn’t really care if that was no more than a night of wine and a fear of the morning.

“Nothing’s changed.” Her voice was flat; the words leaked away from her like her heart had torn. “But I can’t stand any of the choices I have. There’s only death or worse than death and I can’t face that choice anymore.”

“Is the thought of returning to the temple worse than death now?” He smiled. “Listen, if it’s because of last night, I can move nearer to the temple and any time you want to use me that cruelly again, just wave. I’ll be there.”

She didn't smile. The pale look of nausea spread over her, as if the words she would speak had turned her stomach even before she'd forced them out. "I wanted to tell you last night. But I didn't. There isn't an excuse."

Her fear was contagious. This lovely, hot-tempered, passionate, intelligent woman was as brave as the men he'd lived and fought beside, and what she had to say had stolen her courage and left her empty. He met her gaze and held it, waiting.

"I'm pregnant," she said. "If I make it to Numantia and Sarnicio does send me back to the temple, I can survive. But only if I abort the baby."

She could have hit him squarely with a battering ram. The force of her words knocked the air from his chest and lifted him back across the room. The pain of the blow crushed him into a squat, pressing his shoulders back hard into the corner of the room, his palms jammed against his eyes.

She was still speaking. Some of her words crossed the void that stretched and strained and tore the muscle and tendon inside his chest. Old agonies poured through him like black blood and helplessness.

"Marc? I didn't mean to make it your problem. I wanted to tell you. Before." He wrapped his arms tight around the ruptures and forced himself to breathe. He shook his head. At her, or her solutions, or to deny the impotence and frustration of the past.

When he looked up, she was sitting, holding tight to her knees. She'd wrapped the sheets around herself like soft armour; tears ran down her cheeks and utter terror shone from her eyes. When she caught his eyes, she tried again. "My family thinks I'd be better off dead. They think no child should be born into so much shame. I believed them."

Slowly he straightened his legs, shoved his shoulders up the rough plaster of the wall and swallowed bile that burned like acid. His fingers felt thick and numb, his hands club-like and useless.

Once again he concentrated on her words. "You are the first person I ever heard say I was more important than family honour. You said I didn't have to share their guilt. And you said they were wrong. For me and for my child. You said we weren't better off dead."

Her shame and all her family codes of honour made him sick to the stomach. He forced words through the raw burn of his throat. "Don't do it."

"What else can I do?" She wiped her eyes, pleading for an answer. "No man will ever have me."

All the pain of the past cut itself into his frown and rasped in his throat as he demanded, "What can you do? How many choices do you need? By all the useless gods, you've got money. You had access to guards, caravans more comfortable than the morons next door use, brains and courage and looks. You could have walked out the door in any direction and made a new life for yourself and the child."

"But...." The shock of realities she'd never glimpsed burned in her eyes.

"But what?" He dropped his voice and levelled the tone so it reflected threats she could not have imagined. "It's one thing to play by these ridiculous rules and strike tragic poses and run from one danger to another for the sake of family honour. It's another to kill a baby just so you can stay in the game.

"As for what man? Look at yourself in a mirror. Any man on any street would have you. No, sorry, you're right. You'd be slumming it and that would never do, would it?"

Before she could speak again, he spun to unbar the door and stormed out of the room.

[top]

CHAPTER ELEVEN.

Marella kohled her eyes and tried desperately to paint some colour into her face. She knew the air was not so cold, but she needed the soft warmth of a woollen *palla* around her. Cold filled her up from deep inside. It chilled her skin and sent shivers over her teeth as she made herself pack her belongings.

The servant boy's frantic knocks rushed her to the door. Behind him, the corridor was dim; heavy clouds and scuds of rain greyed out the best of the morning. The boy ducked and looked around as thunder boomed against him. He was shaking with naked terror. "Ma'am, the man came and took the saddle horse. He said it was all right. I couldn't stop him."

"It is all right." She bent to his height. "What did he take? Did he say if he was coming back?"

"No," the boy whimpered. "He took things from the wagon. A sword belt and knives and a pack. I don't know what was in it. He didn't say he was coming back."

She forced a tight grimace that should have been a smile. "I need someone to harness the team and drive them for me." Her voice croaked and she cleared her throat. "And to pack my things into the *carra*. I will talk to your mistress about it, but can you find a man to do that for me?"

"The mules are in the traces. He did that too, before he left."

Marella nodded and turned back into the room while she counted out coins. As she handed them to the boy, she said, "This is for you. If you need to pay someone to drive, come and tell me."

When the boy ran out into the rain, she sat down onto the bed and cradled her belly in trembling fingers. She had until Bilbilis to decide what she could do. If Marc hadn't reappeared by then.... Her heart sank and tears burned into her eyes. She took a deep breath and coughed away the thickness in her throat. If Mark hadn't reappeared by then, she would sell everything she could sell discretely and hire a driver to take her, not west to Numantia, but south, down into the middle of the country.

He would go to the coast and then to Britannia.

There was only one place in the empire she could wait. If he ever came back to Hispania, he would go to Toletum. It was as good a place as any to try to learn how to live another kind of life. Pretended courage sat in her chest like a block of ice.

Closing her eyes tight against new tears, she groaned a prayer to the goddess. He'd disappeared before and he'd come back to her. Maybe by Bilbilis, he'd be back.

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Marc watched the caravan begin its slow march out onto the southwest road to Bilbilis. His knuckles stayed white on the reins, and when he moved to take the horse down the hill toward the gate, he kicked her harder than he'd intended, so she jumped, skidding her feet on the wet rounded cobbles of the road.

He tried to breathe calm into his chest. His forehead throbbed with the tension of his frown, aching over the relentless pressure of frustration and guilt that built behind his eyes. By the time they broke for lunch he'd be calm enough to face her. By then he might have found the words he needed to apologize.

She had nothing to do with his past life. And her decisions weren't his to make or to judge. If she'd ever known Neria, ever once seen her shine in the sunlight, she might

understand the pain he felt. Three times she'd miscarried the babies she'd longed for so badly. And finally, when their child should have been born, she and the infant had died.

Still, he had no right to beat Marella with the callused fists of his own grief and frustration. Her choices were her own.

Pulling his cloak in tighter over his shoulders, he drew the hood down to cover his face and hair and walked the mare slowly down through the gates of Nertobriga. He was just one of many travellers moving toward Okilis to farewell the spirits of their dead.

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Leucetius dusted crumbs from the dark fabric of his robe. He enjoyed breakfast, it was the only good part of a morning. The sun was already high and another wine or two would ease the stress of travel.

Rather than spend a whole day in slow transit, he preferred to leave their departure until late morning, ride a steady canter for three or four hours, and then rest again at the day's destination. It had worked nicely for him so far and he had no intention of breaking the routine for the journey out of Bilbilis.

It was the last centre of civilization before he gained his hometown of Okilis. The roads were more and more crowded with travellers as he approached the temple city, and the hours left in Bilbilis would be his last chance to enjoy any luxury for another four days.

Three nights from then it was *Samhain*, and he rubbed his hands together. During the festival for the dark months, the living paid well for the safe passage of their loved ones. He laughed. Superstitious fools were so much easier to compel than thinkers.

The knock, when it came, was too urgent to ignore.

He had a sense for times like this and it was humming at the nape of his neck as he stood to watch the novice open his door. Something important was happening. Something that made his hair bristle and a throbbing heat spread through his loins.

"Sir." The *dux'* elite horsemen were panting, fit men worked to a keen pitch. News was definitely big. "The Lady Marella has been positively identified in a caravan heading this way out of Nertobriga this morning. The Roman has been seen travelling with her, but the cavalrymen sent back after him yesterday found no sign of him."

Leucetius felt his groin swell at the thought of finding the Lady Marella. The lovely Priestess, Marella. His juicy little whore, Marella. "Is the Roman with her today?"

"We don't know, sir." The *equite* managed to spin a hint of disgust into the title every time he answered and it irked. But for now, Leucetius had more interest in his whore. "The caravan hadn't decamped when we left. The Romans are looking for him rather than the Lady. Now we have a report that positively identifies the caravan, they'll trail the vehicles today and try to pick him up that way, sir."

"Good." Leucetius wiped the fine silk that formed his moustache, remembering the smell of her, the taste of her on his lips. "You will ride back with us now. How soon can we intercept the caravan?"

The *equite* balked; "Our horses have run hard for two hours, sir. They need to be spelled."

"They will run two hours again, officer. Or you will run instead." He met the cold hatred in the soldier's eyes and let a small reptile smile touch his mouth. "We'll be on the road back to Nertobriga in half an hour."

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The caravan moved steadily southwest, not any faster or slower than Marc expected, but he pressed a hand up under his hair at the base of his skull, wiping away nervous sweat. He rode well back among a mottled collection of pilgrims travelling on foot or mounted, keeping it just in sight.

His neck was stiff, his shoulders clenching repeatedly as if they sought to shrug off a target fixed to his back. He turned again, looking back along the busy road toward the dark rain shadow over Nertobriga.

They'd cleared the thunder and lightning, but the tension stayed with him and his horse tossed her head, skipping sideways at the dangers he imagined for them both. Except it wasn't imagination. He'd named this sort of prescient dread *intuition* many long years and hard campaigns ago, and he trusted it too much to discount the growing concerns.

But the time to act decisively had passed.

From the time he'd heard the arguments outside their *taberna* in the early morning, his gut had warned him they should run for cover. They should have drawn a new line, waited and tagged themselves to a new caravan, or even risked losing a day to travel north, just to break up the predictability of their journey.

He'd let himself get too close to a problem that wasn't his to resolve. His reaction had been instinctive. No calming logic or careful consideration could have changed it, but his anger was going to cost. He could smell the threats he'd ignited. He could taste them.

The only way to escape was to run ahead of the fire. And that meant now.

He used his knuckles to push the sweat from his lip; somewhere in the midst of it all there had to be some hope. Around him, the barren landscape offered no inspiration. Patches of scrubby bush and wide grey floodplains baked under the sun like bleaching bones. There was no cover. There was nowhere to run.

They had the gathering rush of locals converging on the temple city of Okilis for the festival, and it offered some scant protection. But if the *dux*, or the priest, or the Romans still had their eye on this particular caravan, no crowd or confusion was going to be enough.

As he turned to check the road again, his instinct screamed to run, now, up to the di Sicoris' *carpentum*, gather Marella up onto the horse with him, and ride wide. Maybe even turn back. But that was no longer an option.

His fears had risen to the point where cold sweats itched on his lip and rolled heavily in his stomach. Indecision paralysed him, and he rubbed again at his neck where he felt the hot breath of doom stalking inexorably up on them from behind.

Marella couldn't ride.

She could make her own decisions, she could act on her own conscience when it came to her baby, but he would not willingly risk the child like that. Shaking was the recommended way to induce miscarriage in early pregnancy, especially being shaken by the action of animals. Hard riding was to be avoided at all costs for pregnant women.

Marella couldn't ride, and he couldn't leave her to the honourable men of her family. Between the two impossible extremes lay hard choices. What had Marella said, death or worse than death?

Beside him families trudged doggedly toward the distant festivities, oblivious to the danger that lurked in his shadow. When the sound of cantering horses reached him, he quickly threw a leg forward and slipped to the ground. Walking beside him, a woman and two young children looked up in surprise and he smiled, lifting first one, then the second child up into the saddle. There was nowhere to run, no way to get clear. By

walking he could blend better into the crowd, but it put him on the ground and two more innocent lives in the fallout from his choices.

Every choice paid out, one way or another, and there was no way to tell how it would go in the end.

The troops were only looking for him. They had no interest in Marella or the *Dux* di Lusone's family and their scandals. The searchers had been too thorough when they found the caravan the day before. They'd moved like men on a mission, combed and combed again as if the order to find him had come from the top.

The horses were moving closer and the time for making choices was slipping away like water. He could hear eight, or ten? He smiled. They weren't taking any chances.

As they passed, they held the horses steady and scanned the passing faces carelessly. Hispania had been at peace too long. But they had a goal in sight, and their pace began to slow as they approached the distant line of vehicles.

The inevitability of disaster rolled down the middle of his back in drops of cold sweat. They'd passed over Marella yesterday; they were unlikely to do it again. The slow tramp of pilgrims moved him forward like a heavy heartbeat. Already the distance was shortening. The caravan had been stopped.

Marella felt the wagons slow. There had been no hint of alarm, no sign anything unusual had occurred, and there was no good reason for the panic that chilled her skin. It would be another hour at least until the midday break, and she tried to calm the rush of her heart and the cold in her stomach. But the sound of horses blowing hard and stamping, marking time outside the curtained walls of the carpentum, stopped her heart in her chest. Hardly daring to breathe, she crushed herself down, curling her legs up, making herself smaller as the wagon lurched and jolted to a stop.

Roman soldiers drew the curtained walls apart, ignoring the startled faces of her travelling companions as they sought and found Marella. With respect neither to her rank nor to her gender, the officer said sharply, "Get out."

She glued her native hatred to noble dignity and formed them into words. "No. Why? Whose authority do you think you have?"

The Roman's expression didn't change. "You can stay there. Tell me where the Briton is and you can go on your way."

Marella glared at him in silence, and he continued in the same tone of bored irritation. "No? Right, so get out."

Briefly she considered defying him. It would be a short-lived resistance. From where she sat she could see five men and she could hear others. Nothing about these men suggested they were gentlemen. Gathering her skirts carefully, she leaned forward and stepped from the couch, holding out a hand to demand the officer's support as she stepped down from the *carpentum*.

On the ground, he kept her fingers in his as he led her back from the side of the wagon. "Now," he said. "You stand out there were he can see you and tell me now, right now, do I send the caravan on without you and take you back with me to Nertobriga? Or do you tell me where he is so I can let you go on to meet your own fates?"

Marella met his ire with a cool stare bred in her from generations before. "I am the *Dux* di Lusone's sister," she began.

"I know who you are. Your options haven't changed. It's only time that's running out. Where is he?"

She gathered herself again, as the pounding of the pulse at her temple became deafening. There was no point in denying any knowledge of Marc. She tried the truth.

"He left early this morning. Now that I have these ladies to travel with, he has gone back the way he came."

There was enough pause in the Roman's response to give Marella hope. If they'd been looking for Marc since they left Nertobriga and had failed to find him, they may have believed it was true. Maybe it was true.

The officer met her glare with an air of cool assessment. Leading her closer to the nearest horseman, he quickly changed his grip to her waist. He hoisted her easily, and she landed back on the curved pommel of the saddle and grasped the rider's arm to keep her balance. "Okay. You can come back with us." Turning back to throw himself onto his own horse, he nodded a signal to the drivers of the caravan, and called to his own men, "Fall in around her."

Marc lifted the children down, mumbling apologies they couldn't understand, and swung himself back up into the saddle. Too predictable, too inevitable. If he was anywhere nearby, he was watching and they knew it. She was easier bait than hours of fruitless searching and not one of the men in that detachment cared a damn who she was.

He wasn't willing to put her on a horse to save her life; there was no way he'd have her riding to save his.

He pulled his horse's head hard to the right and pushed through the line of pedestrians, over the ditch and onto the soft verge of the road. He was tired of hiding. Tired of battles no man could hope to win. Tired of looking over his shoulder. And he was as ready as he'd ever be to meet the consequences of his past.

If Cilo had set orders for his arrest, the men he'd sent weren't looking for a corpse. They wanted the right man. That meant they wanted him alive. That meant Cilo wanted to see the end result of his chase. There was hope in that, however slim.

There was no place to run from here and no chance to fight his way out.

He took a deep breath, filling his lungs until they felt like they might burst, and held it while he reached a hand up to the golden thread at his throat. His expression tangled, caught between a frown and a smile as he let the breath go slowly and turned the mare, kicking her up to a jog toward the approaching troops.

Reaching back over his shoulder, he drew the broad-bladed sword, and tested the familiarity of its hilt in his hand. He'd never liked the weight of a sword, he'd always preferred smaller blades, and he laid the weapon flat across his lap as he closed the gap.

It would have been a time to pray if he'd ever found a god who listened. With their Celtic names and their Roman names and Greek before that, Marc wondered just how many gods answered to Marella's devotion. Not many. He shrugged, none that made any difference in the end.

He raised his eyebrows and watched the soldiers as he covered the last few yards to where they waited. They wore the banded iron of *lorica segmentata*, and the cheek plates of their helmets curved down to guard their throats. There wasn't even an easy chance with a thrown knife, not on a moving horse with a moving target.

The soldiers pulled up short, as if they expected an ambush. It seemed too easy. "Put the sword down," the officer called apprehensively. His eyes were moving over the drifting travellers.

"Let her down," Marc called. "As soon as she's back in that *carra*, I'm ready to go." He lifted the broad blade and held it out to the side, ready to let it fall tip first into the roadside scree.

The Roman frowned, scanned the dusty scrub and turned back to Marc, but gave no order to let Marella down. "We're taking you in. Alive if we can."

Marc nodded, clenching his jaw over the urge to yell. “You might be.” He studied the man in front as the troops moved into position around him. More than a few of them had drawn swords, unsettled by his apparent surrender. “Let her down and we’ll discuss it.”

“You aren’t in a position to give orders, my friend. You won’t live to argue.” The officer rode closer and Marc met him eye to eye.

“I’m not your friend. You don’t want a corpse and you don’t want her. Let her go.”

The officer gave silent assent, and when she had slipped to the ground Marc looked at Marella for the first time. “Go. You know where to go and what to do. Go now.”

Marella froze as fat tears bled down her cheeks. Too many hopes were breaking in her heart. Yet again he’d paid for her life with his and she couldn’t bear it. She had a life, again. He’d bought her another chance and he’d given her choices other than death or worse.

His gaze cut past her terrors. As if he could read her thoughts, he said, “Don’t waste this chance. Go. Now.”

She made herself turn and forced her legs to carry her over the dusty gravel. She couldn’t look back, her eyes were closed over frantic prayers to any god who would keep him safe.

The Roman officer watched her carefully, as if she was a hair-trigger for disaster. “Drop it,” he said again, and Marc moved his fingers rhythmically over the hilt of the sword. Its weight was dragging on the tensions in his neck and he itched to swing it up and take out even one of the smug faces that surrounded him.

“One more thing.” He fixed his eyes on the light shining on the edge of the blade. “You want me alive. Why? What’s the charge? You boys are going to ride all over the province looking for me. Find me. Bring me back to the brig. What’s the charge?”

Marella caught the *carra* and stepped up, daring to peer back just once before she stepped in between the curtains.

“No charge. Just a warrant. And from Rome.” The Roman smiled but it wasn’t convincing. Marc made him uneasy and it began to be clearer why. “No one knows who you are or what you’ve done. So you can tell us while we ride back to the city. Now, drop the blade. I don’t have to kill you to make you safer to handle.”

Marc returned the smile, colder and more certain. “Yes you do,” he said, and let the blade fall.

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Closing her eyes, Marella kept up her fervent prayers to the gods that kept him that Marc was safer than he seemed. If there was no god who watched over him, then she had seen him make miracles for himself. And her.

Every time she believed the situation was hopeless, he’d turned over everything she knew and made a new reality. His wolf goddess loved him, or he was a god. Or a god neither of them knew held his life precious. She held that hope against her chest like a bandage, but it didn’t stop the cold blackness of grief from spreading through her. She couldn’t think of time or chance.

The fact that he’d known and accepted the chance he might have to face his past when he left didn’t make it any easier to live with now. And she didn’t want to look at the future he’d given her. The caravan rolled her onward into that future, with her new friends cooing around her and stroking her hair with offers of wine and forgetfulness.

By the time they were slowing for the lunch stop, her grief had become a cold hard block of nausea.

When Leucetius moved the curtain aside and greeted di Sicoris' daughters, her breath stopped and her world filled with darkness thicker than blood.

"Marella." He rolled her name from his tongue, so she felt its wet tip slide up her throat. "I'm so glad to find you alone."

She wasn't alone. The *carpentum* was crowded to capacity with young women. It was only Marc who was gone. Shudders of pure horror ran through her in waves, from the churning of her unsettled insides to the nape of her neck and down to her ankles. Without him, no one stood between her and the evil that leered at her.

"Ladies, we won't hold up your journey." Words slid out like slugs as he stepped up into the shade of their *carra*. "The *dux'* elites will ride escort for you, and we will continue along here as if nothing had interrupted the trip." He raised the hand of the eldest sister, kissing her fingers lightly, and Marella felt her stomach lurch and her mouth fill with bile. "I hope you won't mind if I share your hospitality."

Her head jerked back and she whimpered, every movement racked by an exaggerated tension, as Jura Torres, her brother's highest-ranking officer, rode to the curtain and pulled it wide.

His first attention went not to Leucetius but to Marella herself. He nodded, assuring himself of her presence as if he was unwilling to trust the judgment of the priest. "Lady," he snapped, then turned his attention back to the Druid. "Sir, we can't resume the journey to Bilbilis. The *dux* will be in Nertobriga tonight. My orders are to take the Lady Marella, if she is found, to Taran himself. Sir."

Marella closed her eyes in grim silence and thanked the goddess for this small mercy. Men and their honour, men and one-up-manship and their struggles for power. As long as the *equites* held enough of Taran's authority, she'd be kept in Taran's custody. As hopeless as that may have been, at least for the moment she was out of her rapist's hands.

Leucetius flushed scarlet. The smell of him in the cramped space of the girl's *carpentum* brought the wash of nausea back to her throat, and she held her head in her hands. Her mind filled with images of his face, twisted in the grimace of violent discharge. Her flesh crawled away from the memory of his touch and she pressed her thumbs onto her eyelids to crush out the vision of his wet pink tongue sliding over her skin.

The sisters did no more than grumble at the inconvenience, and peer from the curtains at the physiques of the riders at their sides. With painstaking precision, the drivers forming the girl's retinue turned their teams and remade a line, moving back through the crowds toward the thunder and rain over Nertobriga.

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Suelta raised herself from her couch enough to part the curtain and check the sky, before lowering herself slowly back into the softness of her cushions. Behind the masses of heavy draining cloud, the sky was darkening toward evening, and that meant Nertobriga must be close.

She poured a generous belt of opium decoction into her goblet of wine and tried to sip. Despite the high levels of drug in her blood, the swollen splits inside her lips still stung enough to screw tears from her eyes. Her wrist was tightly bound with a poultice for the swelling, and she rested it carefully over her sorest ribs. If she closed her eyes,

she might sleep the last few jostling hours until she could relax into a bed that didn't move.

It was cruelty, plain bloody-mindedness, that made Taran insist she join him on the journey to Okilis. She had no interest in celebrating the festival of the dead, and her physician had explicitly forbidden any type of travel.

And there was no hope now for Marella. By her own actions she had confirmed all of Taran's worst accusations. The Roman peasant was her lover. They would find her, if they hadn't already, and they would kill her.

Maybe Taran had planned to have his wife watch the execution, just to ram his point home. She could never defy him like that again. That was his point, and it churned inside like hot fury.

That was his point.

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Taran chewed bile.

Numantia and Sarnicio. His sister had a hide like leather. She had no shame. She would even have taken the Roman lover with her.

The fact that the Druid had been truthful all along rankled. Taran had no love for the snake of a man, but he'd been useful before. He would be again. And Taran would be less inclined to doubt him in future. If a story as fanciful as this, Marella with a Roman, had proven true, Leucetius could say the sky was green and the horses were flying and he would have to be believed. The story had been convenient; he had never thought it could be true.

He pulled his leather cape in closer about his shoulders in a vain attempt to stay dry.

The city was no more than an hour away, then a hot soak while his men went out to retrieve the intelligence left for them by the riders he'd sent ahead. His hands tightened on his reins and he spat, hawking to loosen the burn in his throat. By tonight he would know if Marella had been found. And the Roman peasant.

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Clovus Fenius, *Tribuni Augusticlavius* in command of the units at Nertobriga, re read the dispatch he held, and looked to his centurion. “How long?”

“At this time of year.” He blew a thoughtful breath over his lip. “With the Pyrenees pass still open....” He tapped his hand on the table. “Somewhere near thirty hours there, sir. Fourteen relay riders easily. Each way.”

“Right, send the message straight away. I don't know why, so don't ask.”

The centurion clapped his chest in response to the order, but the look on his face spoke volumes about duty above and beyond the call. They'd been friends too long to stand too much on convention, especially at this time of year.

One prisoner. No charges. For Rome to want him held, it was something big. He was going to end up dead sooner or later, anyway. It would be easier to kill him and the business would be finished. But someone high up had feelers out for this man that stretched all over the northern province of Hispania, and they didn't want him dead. Word of his sighting had been relayed to Augusta Auscorum in Gallia Aquitania yesterday, as requested. Now another was to go out to say he was in custody.

It was tempting to send the prisoner on to Caesaraugusta, out of their hair. But that would bring Clovus into direct conflict with the *Dux*, Taran di Lusone. This boy had

some tie to the *dux'* sister, and an argument that came down to who had the authority to hold him would get sticky. Maybe even bloody.

If a noble Roman in Gallia Aquitania wanted him held in custody, he'd have to stay in Nertobriga, off-season or not.

Clovus moved to the balcony and sat, lifting his feet to the rail, watching the rain turn the streets below into waterfall torrents.

The Roman who wanted him held was a senate candidate. He'd sent directives to every garrison in Hispania Tarraconensis and he wasn't going to be happy to find they'd held his prisoner, but surrendered him to the local Celtiberian warlord.

Still, it might take the would-be senator a month to travel from there to here, and di Lusone might have the city under siege by then. Over one prisoner. He wasn't worth it, surely.

With the noble sister involved, di Lusone was guaranteed to be howling for blood as soon as he got word of the capture. And since the tip-off that had led them to him had come through di Lusone's men, he would know soon.

If Clovus lost a Roman prisoner, even to someone with di Lusone's authority, it'd be his neck on the line.

He rubbed the greying stubble on his chin. He was stuck between his Roman superiors and an aggrieved Hispanic noble with a violent temper. What he needed was a lever to free himself from the vice.

What were the odds that the *princep* in Numantia would want a full briefing on this drama? What demagogue liked to be left out of the loop when it seemed noble blood was going to hit the palace walls?

He drew a deep draught of his beer and burped loudly into the cool of the evening air.

Local politics bored him to tears. As long as the Celts were all playing nicely between themselves, they caused him no bother. But this time, it might just be the insurance he needed to have Sarnicio di Arevaci, the number one warlord, the *Princep* of the autonomous C*eltiberos* district, involved.

"Yes." He nodded and scratched himself. If the *princep* himself asked for custody, no one could hold Clovus or his men responsible. Another dispatch, sent up to Numantia, might give him an excuse to get the prisoner off his hands. And good riddance.

[top]

CHAPTER TWELVE.

Marella paced her room. It was comfortable, but in reality it was no more than a prison cell.

Taran never did things by halves, and this villa was a case in point. At a time when half the population was on the move toward Okilis to celebrate *Samhain* and every empty room had been rented to travellers, Taran had taken an entire villa overlooking the River Jalon.

Torres had delivered all of her possessions from her wagon into the room, with the exception of her medications. He had no intention of letting her harm herself. Or salve her pain.

The rain had eased through the day and the air had warmed, but the chill in her bones persisted. She wrapped Marc's small rug tight around her shoulders and held her

hands over her child. It had become real. An infant. Her child. No longer just proof of her shame.

She had no tears for herself. Every time she began to feel weak or ill, she buried her face into the soft fabric of the blanket. His smell was woven into the threads and it renewed her determination to survive. She had something to live for as long as this small life grew inside her. There could be no room for hopelessness, not while this child depended on her.

She had seen nothing of her brother since she'd been imprisoned. And with the goddess' blessing, she'd seen nothing of the Druid. But being alone left the sword of Damocles hanging over her, and every noise made her startle. When the door finally crept inward, she whimpered despite her determination to stay strong.

There was no knock and Suelta's voice was delicate, her movements slow and filled with pain. She tried neither a smile nor a kiss of welcome, but contented herself with hugging Marella and saving her broken mouth from more pain. "What have you done, Marella?" she slurred.

Broken sobs stuttered from her chest as Marella hugged her sister-in-law. "I'm so sorry Suelta. I'm so, so sorry. Are you all right." The question was foolishness born of horror and guilt. Marella had known the cost her friend would bear when Taran discovered she'd helped them hide, and yet, she knew her heart had ached more then over Marc's decision to turn her away. Now, if he was still alive, she faced the same question all over again. If she ever saw him again, would he forgive her and hold her, or would he walk away? Whatever he chose, it was too late to ask Suelta if she would survive her involvement in their escape. The answer was obvious.

"This is all so awful, Marella. I shouldn't be here, but Taran is in the city with the priest, arguing with the tribune over this low-born Roman."

Marella felt faint, her vision swam on a darkening rush of hope and misery. "They have Marc here? He's still alive?" Her soul mumbled prayers of thanks to his anonymous god, as she steadied herself on the edge of a table and forced herself to keep breathing.

"Yes. The Romans have called Sarnicio into the argument, too. He's travelling already. Like everyone else in the world, he's on his way to Okilis."

Sarnicio. Marella spun between laughter and tears. Her eyes burned but they stayed dry. He had seemed her only hope, but he was of no help to her now. The best he could offer damned her child to death. He was just one more noble man adding weight to the scales stacked against her. "They'll deal with us quickly then, at least," she heard herself say. "Six days until the festival and five days of travel. They'll all want to get to the city before *Samhain* begins, especially the priest."

When she opened her eyes, the pain in Suelta's face made Marella's heart stumble. She moved so slowly to the couch, Marella began to believe she was torn on the inside. Pain seemed to stab outward from her, sharpening the chilled air around her.

"Taran wants you dead, you know. And he wants your Roman lover dead, too. The priest wants you, he says for judgment but he drools when he speaks of you. Sarnicio has forbidden anyone to harm you, though, until he has spoken to everyone involved. It's the only reason you're still here now. And the peasant."

"Yes." Marella strode to the couch. Taran wanted her and Marc dead, as he had from the beginning. Now she had given him all the justification he needed and there was nothing she could do about that. At least while she was here, she was safe from the priest. But the Romans had Marc and Taran wanted him. How much time could that possibly win them? "Where is he, do you know? Can you see him?"

“Let him go, Marella.” Suelta took two slow breaths and continued, “The Romans want their own back. He’s none of our concern now.”

“I have to help him, Suelta. He’s done nothing wrong. Nothing. I’m telling you again: everything Leucetius said was a lie. Until Marc rescued me from them, I’d never seen him before.”

“It doesn’t matter anymore what’s true and what isn’t. No one will believe you. You can’t help him. I want to see what I can do for you. You have to hope Sarnicio will take your side and send you away to the temple. Tell me you destroyed the foetus, at least, or even that hope is gone.”

Marella studied the bruises and broken skin on her sister’s face. Suelta was right; these men were all going to believe whatever best suited them. All of them had secrets and shames they were trying to hide, and they expected her to carry the cost for them all.

They would kill her and Marc and her innocent child, all in the name of honour. She was horrified in ways she had never felt before. There was nothing chivalrous or manly in the harm done to her sister. Nor in the harm they intended her. “Of course I did,” she lied calmly. “What else could I do?”

Suelta nodded painfully. “It’s for the best.” She struggled to stand. “I can’t risk staying much longer. If Taran comes back he will be angry. Tell me what I can do to help you. Is there anything you need?”

“Nothing.” Marella stepped closer and knelt on the cold flagging at her friend’s feet. “You can’t help me, but you can have a message relayed to Marc’s family in Toletum. It’s all I have. They’re wealthy, there may be something they can do to help him. I’ll have done what I can to repay his help, at least. Between these men and their lies I can’t imagine any way I can survive this, but he has done nothing wrong.”

“His family are wealthy?” Suelta’s eyes lit like a flare of interest, and Marella felt her brow tense and the insistent nausea in her gut seethe. “How wealthy?”

“Very. They hold large estates down along the Tagum.” Suelta’s injuries were sickening. Her face was bloodstained alabaster and her eyes glittered with the fever of pain and opiate. Even so, she managed to straighten as if she’d suddenly found herself in good company. Lies came more easily to Marella’s tongue. She had no qualms, no questions any more about right and wrong. “They’re noble. I keep telling you he isn’t a peasant. And he isn’t Roman.”

The injured woman groaned over a dangerous decision. “Marella, no. This will get even uglier. We’ll have the scandal spread the length of the country and another good family will be baying for your blood.”

“My blood is already spilled, Suelta. Only Sarnicio has any hope of stopping the Druid and I don’t think my chances are very good. They all have too much of their own guilt to hide. But if Marc was handed to the Romans for nothing more than helping me, it’s Taran’s blood his family will want.”

She could barely breathe, hardly hope. Her womb was a rock, weighing heavily in the pit of her stomach, pulling all her choices together into a warm coherent mass. And every ragged breath, every heartbeat that echoed in her loins, was a prayer for her golden peasant. There was no place for hopelessness.

“Send a message, Suelta. Do that for me. I owe him that much at least. Sarnicio can use his authority to take him from the Romans. And they must. But once he has Marc, once Sarnicio has given his ruling, nothing will keep Taran from killing him. You have to tell his family. You have to give them a chance to free him from this mess.”

Suelta rose to her feet, her whole body wavering in the grip of weakness and indecision. “Are you sure they’re noble? He looks like no nobleman I’ve ever seen. And he speaks like a Roman.”

Marella drew a breath and filled herself with calm conviction. “They are from Britannia. His brother was a commander. That’s why Rome is looking for him.” Carefully she pulled together the pieces of his story she could use. “There was an issue of family honour where they refused to fight for Rome. Now the Roman officer he insulted has a vendetta against him.

“We cannot surrender him into their hands. Not like this. Not when he did no wrong and his family have the means to free him.” Her calm dissolved into pleading and she watched her sister sway onto the side of any man who would stand up against Rome. Any wealthy man.

Suelta may have wrung her hands, but her injuries prevented it. She rubbed instead at the bindings on her swollen wrist and forced herself from the fence. “Give me the name, Marella. They may not be able to do anything, but at least they should be told. Who do I contact?” The words were as brittle as her hopes, but Marella drew some small strength from them.

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Dawn light had barely touched the sky when Torres gave Marella his order to dress and enter a waiting *carpentum*. Another night had passed without sleep and her eyes were dry and heavy. If they didn’t leave Nertobriga today, they couldn’t hope to make the journey to Okilis in time for the festival.

A frown ached on her face and the horror of isolation, of not knowing, throbbed in her chest. The decision had to be made today. Sarnicio had to be ready to pass judgment, or the pilgrimage to Okilis would be delayed.

But it was physical revulsion that heaved in her when she smelled her travelling companion.

Leucetius sat in the curtained interior like a vile mantis, long limbs folded, ready to feed. As the wagon rolled slowly into the street, he pressed the pale ends of his moustache down into his mouth, sucking memories from the fine hair. “You stink of fear, my sweet priestess,” he hissed. “What a delightful smell.”

Involuntary contractions pulled Marella into a tight crouch, turned away from his eyes.

“Don’t be uncivil, my dear. I have an opportunity to talk to your Roman. I thought you’d like to come along for the ride.” His small dark eyes glistened, rat like, but there was nothing as innocuous as vermin about him. He reeked of hard malice, cruelty beyond imagination, and being so close to him made every hair on Marella’s body stiffen.

Around the *carpentum*, Taran’s *equites* rode in tight formation. It was their presence alone that stopped her from hurling herself through the curtain into the road. At the moment, nothing seemed more vital than to be away from his leer.

“It won’t be a long chat, you understand,” he continued conversationally. “We all need to be on the road to Okilis by midmorning. Sarnicio has asked us all to meet him there. It seems he didn’t want the inconvenience of travelling back through the backwaters of the province. I can’t blame him.” He grinned sharp white teeth at her and she gagged, her retch amusing him further.

They were to travel to Okilis. Five days. If the *princep* had reserved his judgment until he'd seen all the parties, he'd just handed them the five days it would take to get there.

"These Romans want to keep your Adonis. I wouldn't mind if they just wanted to kill him, but they want to hold him here." He held up his hands in mock exasperation and she forced herself to face him. "We will have to make sure he doesn't get back from our interview, won't we."

The Romans didn't want him dead? Not yet.

If Taran wanted to take custody, if Sarnicio ordered it, the Roman tribune had no authority to hold him. If the tribune hadn't executed him yet, they still had time on their side. Not long. But it was one more tiny thread of hope.

As she stepped through the curtains into the dawn, Marella saw her brother standing with two Roman sentries. The men stood stiffly at arms, showing no apparent deference to the *Dux* of Lusones.

"Taran." Her voice was strained, and she rushed to lift her skirts enough to hurry in his direction. He gave no sign he had heard her, turning away as Leucetius grasped her arm and pulled her past him through the guarded doorway.

In the darkened corridor of this cold, seemingly empty stone building, two of Taran's elites stood guard at a second, shadowed door. Inside, a cowled priest stood clutching a club the size and shape of a man's forearm across his chest, but Marella barely saw him.

Marc stood beside the priest, his hands bound by a heavy leather rope and pulled hard up over his head to a shackle ring on the ceiling. Dark blood had dried around his nose and spattered down his bare chest and into the suede of his trousers. Heavy welts the plum scarlet of unformed bruises crossed his abdomen and chest. His eyes were closed.

Leucetius placed his hands on Marella's shoulders, and she cringed lower, trying to shrink from the touch. "Your brother would like a confession, but your friend here is reluctant to speak." He walked closer to Marc, craning his head forward as if he were studying a strange new creature. "For myself, Marella, I would like a retraction of your slander. We're going to speak to Sarnicio and I don't want your lies sullying my reputation with the *princep*.

"Your brother is waiting outside, convincing the guards there that he will take good care of their prisoner if we take him with us to Sarnicio in Okilis."

Marella focused what courage she could find on Marc. Every nerve in her body strained towards him, longing to run to him and wrap herself around his pain. She tried for the only comfort she could offer. "Toletum isn't too far," she said shakily. "Sixty leagues, is it?"

He opened his eyes and pierced her terror with clear blue, as Leucetius nodded once and the cowled priest slammed the club back against Marc's kidneys.

Marella screamed, and Leucetius grabbed her by the waist, holding her easily. He clicked his tongue in disappointment, and slid closer up behind her so the hard length of his body pressed into her back. "He's not going to get to Toletum. Neither are you, my sweet."

His hands slid slowly up the soft fabric of her *tunica*, moving over her ribs in languid strokes. "If she moves," he said, smiling, "hit him again."

His breath was hot, and he moved his mouth over her shoulder, sucking and biting the soft skin as his long fingers spread over her breasts, cupping then squeezing painfully into the sensitive flesh. She whimpered, choking on a small sob and he caught her aching nipple in his fingers and pinched. "You like that, do you?" he asked,

grinding his swollen groin against the rounded softness of her bottom. Hot bile rose in Marella's throat on sobs, and horror filled her head with black rushing air.

Marc opened his eyes again, clenching his jaw and Marella looked quickly away before he could see her shame, before he could read the memories that plagued her. Her movement was trigger enough and the club swung hard against his stomach. Air exploded from him with a grunt and his knees buckled. The ropes held fast and his shoulders bulged and popped under the torsion.

"Stand up," Leucetius snapped, clawing his fingers into the tenderness of her breasts, and Marc slowly forced his knees to straighten.

"Now, Marella. You see how the game works. You will, sooner or later, recant. Then we can take him with us to Okilis, just to ensure you don't change your story again."

"Don't." It was all Marc could say before another crushing blow smashed across his back and he dropped onto the ropes again.

"We're both dead anyway. I have no pride to protect and they have no interest in the truth." Marella tried to hold back tears, but fear and frustration burned them onto her lashes. A few more days. If they took him to Okilis, it would give Marc's brother five days to get there. "Tell me what you want me to say." Turning to the priest, she spat into his face and he laughed.

He dropped his hands to her hips as he pulled her harder onto himself and gathered the folds of her skirt higher, exposing her thighs. His knee forced her legs to part and his fingers slid around to stab into the warm shadows of her body. "That decision may have saved your life, my dear. Let me see what I can do."

Taran stood beside the *carpentum*, his legs wide spaced, bracing fury in his clenched fists. Leucetius shoved her forward, past the guard and up to stand before her brother's ire. "Tell him, Lady Marella."

Marella was silent, glaring disbelief at Taran's coldness, her eyes in turn accusing and begging. Words came slowly, each sound breaking in her chest. "The man you are holding," she started.

"Don't bother with him, Lady. We know who he is. Tell the Lord *Dux* about me."

She closed her eyes and gathered herself again, to speak. "All I said about the High Priest was a lie. He did me no harm."

Taran ignored her.

Gathering disgust in her mouth, she spat at her brother. Not at his face where he could wipe her judgment away without a trace, but at his chest, at his heart, so the spittle darkened and stained the linen of his tunic. "What did he tell you Taran? Did it eat you up knowing the *princep* had stained your honour and there was nothing you could do about it? It must have burned. How did you sleep knowing you didn't have the courage to stand up to Sarnicio?

"Is it easier now? If you kill an innocent man will it make you feel like a warrior? Like a man of honour?"

He gave no indication he recognized his sister was before him. Without a word, he turned and strode toward his horse.

Leucetius laughed under his breath and Marella sagged, clasping the upright beam of the *carpentum* to keep herself from falling. The Druid called back to Torres, where he and his second-in-command now stood in the place of the Roman guards, "Kill him. Tell the Romans he tried to escape." And he shoved Marella up into the curtained interior of the *carpentum*.

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Torres cut the ropes and Marc dropped to his knees. The sharp static of pins and needles rushed from his wrists to his shoulders and merged into the throb of bruising. The *equite* grabbed hair on the crown of his head and tipped his face back. “Don’t do anything to make me kill you, understand? I don’t follow the Druid’s orders, and death is a bit too final for a man wanted by both the Romans and my Commander.”

His words were heavily accented, but he spoke Latin. Whatever he intended, it was important enough to make sure Marc didn’t get it wrong. He tried to focus on the words, past the screaming agony in his body.

“So, what do we do?” Torres asked rhetorically. “We get rid of you. You have to vanish, but we have to put you somewhere we can get you back if anyone looks like losing their head over you.”

He paced, and Marc concentrated on moving his chest enough to get air into his lungs. Pain branched down his spine and out around his ribs on long fingers of molten metal. It ground like broken bones on every breath. Fluid thickened in his lungs, but he couldn’t have coughed to save his own life.

“The trick,” Torres continued, for his own benefit or for his second-in-command, “is going to be getting you to Okilis. The tribune here is going to be crawling up our fundaments looking for you. And if I give you an inch, you’ll run.”

He strode back and lifted Marc’s face again, holding him still until he opened his eyes. “Did the gods give you enough sense to keep yourself alive?”

Marc struggled to nod, but he didn’t convince the commander of Taran’s elite cavalry. “It’s a five day journey to Okilis in the caravan. I’d need you on your feet in two, riding in three.”

Grunting with pain, Marc pushed his bound hands against one thigh and forced the other leg under himself, then managed a stooped stand. Stars exploded in his head, and the world listed violently to the right. Pain so extreme it rose in hot bile burst in his chest. If he’d eaten in the last two days, he would have vomited. Instead, he hung his head and waited for Jura Torres to go on.

“Okay, you’re following me, then. So listen to one more thing. Don’t make the mistake of thinking I love you or your fancy lady. You even look sideways, and I will kill you. I’m not going to lose one of my men just because Leucetius wants you dead. You’re no more to me than insurance. Am I clear?”

Marc nodded again.

“The Romans want you, they can have you. Taran needs you in Okilis when he has to face the Arevaci, he’s got you. I don’t care either way. Understand? Good. Stay calm and behave and you’ll get food and water. Give me any trouble and you’ll starve.”

He had it. He had it all very clearly.

When the commander turned to walk from the room, Marc watched him retreat down a long dark tunnel. All the pain in his chest rolled itself tight around the image of Marella’s silent humiliation and he tried to groan. Then the lights died.

When he woke, the room had that peculiar chill that comes from being underground. The straw mattress under him was too thin to keep the cold of the stone floor away from the dense ache of bruises and damaged joints. But the air was fresh, not dank or too dry, and it carried the sweet perfume of citrus blossom.

It was night, no light crept in through the metal grills in the high vents. A small lamp burned on a shelf midway up the opposite wall. There was a tin pail. His mattress. And a flask of water.

Thirst drove him past the pain in his arm and chest and he reached slowly for the flask. It couldn’t work. To drink he had to sit, and it took everything he had to raise himself up.

Above him, in the far corner of the ceiling, a cellar door opened and a bundle of rags shuffled down the steps. Slowly but surely it took the form of an old woman, barely five feet tall and almost as round, stooped and swaddled under layers of clothes. Clicking her tongue, she mumbled quietly, holding out a plate of stew. As he rested his shoulders back onto the wall, she clucked more and drew a filthy rag from her sleeve, spat on it, and swiped at dry blood on his face.

Thick brown fingers carefully probed at cuts and she complained bitterly about something as she felt the depths of her clothing for a spoon. Marc watched the crone. She was not much of a guard, but for the state he was in, she would be more than enough. He had to ride in three days. If it was night, he'd already slept through one.

If he had to ride to Okilis in three days, he might as well swallow glass now. He looked at the concern in the old woman's face and snorted a quick laugh.

On the other hand, he was still alive. Carefully he moved the spoon to his mouth and started to eat. And the Druid was too close to Marella. That was reason enough to stay alive. Marella sure as Hades didn't intend him to travel to Toletum, so she had to mean someone could come from there. Clever, clever girl.

Depending on how soon Luc got the message, and how quickly the *equites* expected him to cover the distance to Okilis, they might get there just about the same time. If he could get there at all.

He pushed the food down his neck and drank as much water as he could. What he knew of the native language, he tried. Holding out the plate, he asked, "More?" And smiling, he tried, "Wine?"

The old woman seemed pleased, not so much like any guard he'd ever known. She held his face still as she clucked and wiped again at his injuries, telling him, it seemed, he was in bad shape. That was no news. He didn't need a mirror. Taking the empty plate, she wiped her fingertips gently down his hair, mumbling encouragement as she shuffled off toward the steps.

His chest was one wide bruise. Only the shades and colours of the injury changed. It was easier to breathe when he lay down, but he wanted to move, to feel out the extent of the damage. He needed to clear his lungs and his head.

Not for the first time, he studied the reasons he'd waited for the Roman guards to arrest him. There weren't reasons, it was singular. One reason.

Marella.

At some time in the last six days she had moved from a catalyst for change, a simple reason to move, to the reason he'd stopped. And stood still. And waited for the choices in his past to catch up with him.

The same choices that had carried him back to the Roman army had pulled him out of their hands again. Not even Rome was a match for her noblemen, it seemed. Now her family had him, and they had her, and the Druid was among them.

He changed position slowly, trying to find a way to hold himself that didn't hurt. All this could have been avoided if he'd listened to his instincts instead of his memories. He should have known better than to let Marella's situation blur the lines between his life and hers. But the thought of her came as a wash of softness, a well of healing rising up inside him. Her decisions mattered to him more than they should because he wanted them to.

He sighed into the shadows and rubbed carefully over his chin. She was so perfectly female. So wonderfully rounded and yielding and warm. So achingly beautiful. He pressed thumbs into his eyes and shook his head. Was it sex? He grinned to himself. Had he sold himself into their hands for a night of relief?

Pulling up the first face that came to mind, he considered the di Sicoris sisters. One, then all four. Tall, slim, willing. Young. But as soon as an image of Marella rose into his mind, he dropped the others like a soiled rag.

Looking down at his own mottled swellings brought to mind the bruises on Marella's body. The smell of citrus blossom filled out the images in his head. If he closed his eyes, he could imagine she was standing in the room. If he wandered with the memories, he could feel the warmth of her skin against his lips and taste the sweet conviction in her kisses. If she'd been unsure of her decision at first, she'd found certainty very quickly.

When she offered a cup she didn't hold back, and he'd drunk to the dregs. She was in his blood, as surely as the finest wine. And like fine wine, he could almost bring the taste back to his tongue. Almost. He could clearly see her mouth, turned up in the slightest smile. Mocking, challenging, needing to be kissed. He smiled, and winced as muscles twitched and spasmed uncomfortably. All he needed was another sip. And another.

Gathering his resolve, he braced himself against the wall and pushed himself into a stand. He could roll his shoulders, the joints weren't damaged, though he wouldn't like to have to depend on his sword arm. Twisting sideways, first one way, then the other, he felt no grind or sharp stab of broken bone. He wasn't dead yet.

In three days he would be ready to ride.

[top]

CHAPTER THIRTEEN.

Okilis was a dusty beige hive. One wide, deep green swathe of remnant forest along one side of the city wall gave its only colour. The swarming masses of humanity gave it life.

No part of the city stood empty. The road was clogged, and even the ducal caravan had been forced to slow for most of the journey.

Leucetius had ridden in a quiet fury, chafing to get back to his priestly duties as soon as possible.

Taran rode through the grey roll of the landscape in livid silence, speaking only to his men, gripping the hilt of the sword at his hip as if bloodshed was the only answer to his rage.

Suelta kept her own counsel, avoiding any action that might annoy her husband, or cause him to travel any nearer her *carra* than necessary.

Marella rode in silent desperation. She lay curled on a couch, her hands clamped tight over the promise of fullness in her belly, praying. The last she knew of Marc was watching Jura Torres spin on his heel to answer the order to kill. Neither Torres nor his second had joined the caravan but that meant no more than Taran had given them other orders.

Nothing gave her cause to hope he was still alive.

Nothing but the conviction that she could still feel his touch. If she closed her eyes she could see his smile. She could feel his breath on her shoulder where he'd slept and the warmth of his hand on her belly. When she wrapped it up tight around her shoulders, she could smell him in her blanket. He had to be alive, because she could not imagine going on living in a world he didn't share.

Until she knew otherwise, she was going to believe he'd survived. They were ordered to hold him until Sarnicio had passed judgment and that meant bringing him to Okilis. But she'd imagined that meant he would travel with the ducal party. There'd been no sign of him and no mention of him since they left Nertobriga.

The journey had been a nightmare of containment and isolation. She had not seen Suelta in five days, and Taran's guard had kept the Druid away from her. The silence was deafening, making her want to scream with frustration. But she'd kept her peace. She'd quietly done whatever she was asked to do and she spent her time asleep or at prayer. She could do nothing else.

The caravan moved steadily through the throngs, skirting the central markets of the temple city and continuing on to where the city crawled up onto low hills, winding up sand coloured roads, past sand coloured buildings, into the sand coloured heights.

Their villa faced back over the city on one side and across a river of thatch and terracotta tiled roofs to Sarnicio's estate on the adjacent hillside. It was too close. Marella's only small window showed his artificially green lawns and splashes of bright red geranium, shining like a celebration in the midst of so much grey.

The dust had found its way into her hair, her clothes and her skin. As she soaked that much away in a hot tub, she felt more of the dull grit in her eyes, in her throat and drying in her blood.

Tonight, there would be colour and life in the city. For three days, from tonight, *Samhain*, all the natural laws would be suspended, and the celebration of life and death would give free reign to the entire population.

Cernunnos, the Horned God, would descend to the underworld, and with him the loved ones who had died through the year. His passing would be upheld with food and drink, the best of the harvest, and his prodigious virility would be celebrated by anyone who could find a partner. Or partners.

Marella had no interest the celebration. At dusk every hearth fire in the country would be extinguished, and it was that cold darkness that resonated in her. Cold, dry ash.

The door opened slowly, and although the movement frightened her, the instant passed as she realized Suelta had at last been able to come to her room.

"Marella?" The sound was still as dry and brittle as parchment. When she pulled back the curtain, her face was as pale as death. Only the darkness of her abrasions and the mottled bruises spread beneath the skin gave her any colour at all.

"Are you all right?" Marella asked the question, but she didn't need an answer. No living person had lips so parched and white. Suelta carried a goblet of water, sipping constantly to ease the endless dryness.

"No." Dragging herself to a stool, Suelta perched, rigid and in obvious agony. "But I wanted to come. Taran has been in conference with Sarnicio since we arrived. He went straight to his villa and only just got back."

Marella curled forward against her knees, staring at the steam lifting from the surface of the water, shoring herself to hear the worst. "What did he tell you?"

"Me? He told me nothing." Suelta tried to laugh, but death was too close to let the sound escape. She closed her eyes and collected her strength. "He told his men they'd escort you to Sarnicio's villa sometime today. No one wants to miss tonight's celebrations, you understand." Again she tried to smile.

"There are things I want to tell you, my dear friend. I'm not sure I'll get another chance, so I'll tell you now. I had a relay sent to your rescuer's family. I could tell them no more than that Taran would be holding him in Okilis. That's all I knew at the time."

Marella coughed a small sob of relief. Marc was alive. The stiffness melted from her spine and she sagged into the warmth of the water. But the fact he had become her rescuer and not 'that Roman peasant' left a bad taste in Marella's mouth. Money could buy you honour, no matter what the circumstance.

"At the moment Leucetius thinks he's dead, but Taran wants him alive. Once the case has been heard, they will continue with him down to Caracca."

"Caracca?" That made no sense, why would Taran take Marc anywhere. Surely once her trial was over, he had no value at all. Except as a slave. She straightened abruptly, her trembling rushing tight ripples across the surface. "They'll sell him?" Her voice strained higher. "Slavery?"

Suelta shook her head and raised a shaky hand to sip. "The Colosseum in Caracca. The games. With his build and his colouring and his experience as a fighter, they'll make good money for him. They'll sell him as a gladiator. It could be worse. From there his family can buy him out of his chains."

Marella's mouth dropped open over silent cries, but her sister lifted her fingers for quiet. "Let me finish. Today," she took several slow breaths, "Sarnicio will see you. Alone. He has spoken to Taran and the Druid already, but he wants to see you alone.

"You have to remember that your hero isn't here yet. Sarnicio hasn't seen him. No old man wants to be compared to someone who looks like Marc, Marella. You have to convince him before he has a chance to see him, do you understand?"

Marella nodded.

"Fall at his feet, my dearest. He won't want to send you to the temple; the shame is already too great. So if you do still want to live, beg him. Lie to him as easily as you've lied to me."

"But I..."

Suelta closed her eyes and turned her head. "I've had four babies, Marella. Look down at yourself. Do you think I can't see the changes in you?" She sipped and waved a hand. "It doesn't matter to me, now. You have to live with your choices and I don't.

"One last thing. This man you've found. He has a Roman nobleman looking for him. That's why he was held at Nertobriga. That's why they searched our caravan before we left. Only Sarnicio's claim on him allowed us to keep travelling to Okilis."

The issue of family honour, Marella thought. His tribune.

"He is also on his way from *Gallia Aquitania*. It's a long way if the nobleman likes to travel in style and comfort. I hope his family find him first."

And if he's a soldier? Marella thought. If he can ride? And if he hates to lose? And if he wants Marc dead badly enough?

"That's all, my dear. That is everything I know. I hope it will help you." She reached into the folds of her *stola*, looking sadly at the small bottle she held, then she stood and offered it to Marella.

Marella reached and took the vial, looking questioningly at her friend.

"Belladonna," she said. "Use it, Marella. What is any life without honour?"

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Marc's hands were bound, but separate enough to help balance. He'd been well fed, had room to move, and a physician had checked his injuries and provided medication. The days in the orchard's cellar had been as easy as they could be, considering the beating he'd taken.

Now, herbs eased the sharpest of the pain.

Holding a steady canter was bearable, just. But riding into the third day, he wished, at least, that they'd take the hood from his face. The thick hessian and the heavy handed use of painkillers left him disoriented. Every bit of concentration he could muster was focused on dragging air into his chest and keeping his balance.

Torres slapped his shoulder, jolting a grunt of pain and asked, "Nearly there; are you going to make it?" He laughed, and Marc pulled his shoulders back just enough to breathe again.

"Take the hood off."

"I might do that soon. We're only half an hour out of town and I don't want you to attract too much attention going in." They rode on in silence until the call went up to slow and the horses dropped back to a walk. "It's the big celebration tonight. Crowds everywhere. I wouldn't want you to make the mistake of thinking you'll have cover if you try to run."

Marc took his weight forward onto his hands for a moment, ignoring the statement. His hands were tied back to the saddle on enough length to let him drop to the ground. If he did, he'd drag. Both the men with him carried broadswords and daggers, and a thick cane they'd used from time to time on the journey, just to remind him to behave.

He wasn't going to run. Not yet. His hosts had paid particular attention to his health. Too much. It reminded him of the stories of children fattened to eat and men fattened for sacrifice.

When, at last, Torres lifted the hood from Marc's face, he wasn't gentle, but it meant that at last Marc could let a deep painful breath help to clear his head. They rode through featureless grey hillsides, where low slopes and dry pastures stretched away on all sides without hope of cover.

"When we get up here to the city, I'm going to take you through to a villa. The same deal applies." It was the Taran's commander's way of heading off trouble and Marc was happy to play by these rules. Torres told him what they would do and how. His side of the bargain was to stay quiet and do what he was told. That way no one hurt him too much. He didn't have much say in the terms; in his present condition, resistance was useless anyway. He had no choice but to bide.

"You're going to go into a room here until Taran calls for you. Food, water, medicine." Carrots to keep you on the right track. Once Taran called, maybe before, the deal was going to end. So why all the food?

They were taking care of their merchandise. Maybe Taran didn't even know he was still alive. If Torres here wanted to turn a profit on a dead man, Taran would never find out. Slavers were notoriously discrete. No, if it was that simple, they could have sold him in Bilbilis. Also, his captors were edgy about making it to Okilis in good time for *Samhain* and the ceremony for the dead.

Marc tried feeling around for clues. "I want to go to the ceremony tonight," he said. Where's your weak point, Commander?

Torres laughed. "Didn't you hear me? I said you're going to wait in a room at the villa."

"The dead are about tonight, Commander. My dead. Your dead. I want to go to the ceremony." He turned to watch the soldier beside him. There are few atheists on the front line, and no one kills for a living without dreaming the faces of the slain. "I'm in no condition to fight. I'm unarmed. You can allow me to show respect for the dead. Sir."

Torres met his even stare and matched it. He laughed again, but he looked away first. "I'll see off my dead. You'll be locked in your room."

“Your Lady Marella was consecrated to Diana,” Marc said. “The Virgin Huntress will be loose tonight, too.”

He left the men to consider that. Torres’ second-in-command had ridden closer, silently, but the glint of rampant superstition glazed his eyes. When Torres had ridden too long in silence, and rubbed his hands once too often, Marc asked, “How Romanized is your temple? Cernunnos, the Great Hunter, the Horned God. And Diana, the Virgin Huntress, walking the streets among us. Blessing or cursing.” He smiled at the second-in-command. “I wonder if the goddess will look very kindly on Marella’s enemies tonight.”

Torres’ second-in-command was a short, stocky man with two old scars marking his face. His hands were thick and burred with calluses. He looked like he would strangle bears for fun, and yet the thought of angering the gods, and the dead, left him obviously cold with superstitious dread.

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Ecrus Reye Garcia Sarnicio di Arevaci held his hands out in welcome when Marella ran toward him. He looked older, or her view of him was less forgiving than it had once been.

“Marella. You look as divine as ever. I am overjoyed to see you again.” The welcome dropped from his tone as suddenly as if it were a hot rock. “If only the circumstances were better.”

“My Lord.” She dropped to her knees at his feet and pressed his hands against her forehead. “Any circumstance that allows me to be near you again is worth its cost.”

Once, she would have said these words and meant them. Once, she had sat at his feet and wept, begging him not to send her away. Then it wasn’t thoughts of shame that terrified her, but the knowledge that the man she’d loved was going to discard her.

“Thank you, my Lord, for seeing me; I know it must be hard for you to have to deal with all this. But I knew if I could find a way to force them to bring it before you I would get a fair hearing.”

“My dear child.” He helped her to her feet, slipping a protective arm around her waist. “What is there to hear? You took a Roman lover, tried to escape when you were discovered, and now you’re both here to shame our whole family.”

It was hopeless. The cold light of his gaze told her he had long ago made up his mind. As Suelta had said, the truth didn’t matter, only what people would think. Turning into his embrace, she pressed herself softly against him, resting her head against his chest like a crying child. “You know that isn’t true. I wasn’t trying to escape; I was coming here to you. No matter what they told you, you know you are the only man I ever loved.” She turned her gaze up to him. “I know you believe me. I know you will listen. Otherwise, why would you have given me an audience? My Lord you know me. You know I chose the temple over any other man. You know that.”

The coldness in his eyes had warmed. Even the skin at his neck where she pressed her cheek had warmed beneath her touch. Gently, he turned her face up to his and kissed her, sliding the firm shaft of his tongue into her mouth. His breath whistled and wheezed against her ear, and she leaned closer into his embrace. She let her fingers grip his robe, to cling and pull him to her like he was her life itself.

When he moved her back, his eyes had softened over memories of the lessons she’d learned at his hands, and he sighed as if he couldn’t bear to let her go. “Oh Marella. You are without doubt the most desirable woman in Hispania.” He nodded to himself, and Marella kept her lips from tightening.

He slipped a hand softly down her cheek and cupped her chin. “I believe you. Of course I believe you.”

Leaving her, he walked up the two wide steps to where his throne-like conference chair had been settled. Turning slowly, carrying the weight of every one of his sixty-three years, he sat to face her. “But what would I do about that, my sweet girl? Surely you don’t want to live, knowing you’ve brought so much shame on everyone in the whole family?”

“What have I done?” She felt the ground she’d gained slipping. “If you believe me, why do you make me responsible for Leucetius’ crimes?”

None of the warmth remained in his eyes. They were as cold and determined as they had been the day he’d refused her begging a year ago. “You did nothing wrong. And the Roman they caught with you, he did nothing wrong. I’ll be talking to him tomorrow. Still, where does that leave me? Where does it leave you, Marella?”

He raised his hand, a signal to someone unseen, and the doors behind her opened. “You can’t take your soiled body back to the temple. Perpetual virginity, you promised to the goddess. That’s a joke now, isn’t it? Death. Or marriage. You could have considered marriage once before Marella, but you insulted my poor nephew. Remember? Does the offer of marriage suit you better now?”

She was silent. Guards wearing tight dark grey tunics and long segmented leather kilts in the Roman fashion moved to stand beside her.

“You might be interested to know that the idea of marriage has been raised with me. I could say no on your behalf, knowing as I do that you could never love any man but me.”

Her face had fallen to cold contempt, there was no room left for games and lies. He’d only given her an audience to amuse himself with her grovelling.

“What do you think I should do, Marella? What would you do in my place, huh?

“Should I see the Roman in the morning and decide if he should keep you? Could you stand that, my dear? Your blood and all your exquisite beauty in the crude hands of the common soldiery. And a coward, at that, a deserter, a man without integrity.

“Should I agree to hand you on to whatever sad soul will have you, just to have you out of my sight? I could still make you a better marriage than the low Roman. Even as a whore.

“Should I call your brother and give him my blessing to cut your throat? That’s what he would like to do. So tell me, which is it? What do you think I should do?”

“You should do the honourable thing. My Lord,” she spat. Every insult brought Marc’s image more clearly to her mind. This man had no business speaking of honour or courage or integrity. He didn’t know what they were. “At your age it’s important to be able to sleep at night. You’ve already had more years than most. More than you deserve.”

Sarnicio laughed hard with genuine amusement. “I have missed you.” He kept smiling, signalling to one of the guards and pointing to Marella, indicating the quality of her joke. “I’m not going to decide what to do with you, yet. They’ve been told to keep you comfortable. I don’t want you locked in a cellar or denied food and water. And you won’t want to miss the ceremony for the dead tonight. You won’t want to be alone in a cold dark villa once all the fires are doused.

“I’ll see how you are feeling tomorrow.” He’d made his pronouncement and he raised his hand again to signal. “I’m talking to your Roman then. We can all make the decision together. You and your Roman, Taran and the Druid. And me. That’s fair.”

As she turned to leave, a child ran into the room. The girl looked to be in her early teens, possibly just marriageable age, with small neat breasts and narrow hips. She was

richly made up and her hair was dressed with beads. She ran to Sarnicio's side as the guards led Marella from the room.

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Six boys struggled on the dry gravel road as they carried her *carpentum* back up the hill toward the ducal villa. Four guards had followed from Sarnicio's staff, walking at the corners of the litter and Taran's two *equites* rode behind, nursing the *princep's* insult. One injured girl needed six men? It was a blatant slur on Taran and his best soldiers.

Torres wasn't blind to the meaning, either, when he drew his horse up behind the trailing riders. "What are they doing there?" he hissed, pointing to the grey clad men.

"Sarnicio's orders, Sir. They're with the Lady until tomorrow when he sees her again." The man who spoke was a veteran of more battles than Sarnicio would remember. He hawked and spat, showing his commander the depth of his contempt.

Jura Torres moved out alongside the foot soldiers, sneering his disdain at the two nearest as he passed. "Four of you for one girl," he said distinctly, flicking his thumb across his nose in a gesture of derision. Sarnicio's guards stiffened, clapping the heels of their pikes to the road with each step, refusing to meet his glare.

Marc steadied his breath and clenched his jaw against the rigor settling into his joints as he rode alongside the *carpentum*. Pain left coloured tracings across the insides of his eyelids and he tasted blood on every breath. As firmly as he could, he leaned his weight forward onto his hands on the pommel. "Marella," he called softly.

The cane cracked down on the middle of his shoulder and he swore through his teeth.

Her curtain opened, and four guards stumbled over slave boys and each other to catch her before she could leap out and cover the distance to the horses. "Marc," she called as they formed a line, blocking her escape. Grasping the upright beam, she stood up through the curtain, tilting her whole litter sideways. Sarnicio's guards ducked and leaned in to catch the weight of the litter before it dropped down onto where they stood.

Torres' second-in-command cracked his cane against Marc's lower back, and Torres turned back with his sword drawn. Marc fixed his glare onto the second-in-command and said clearly, "Remember him, Marella. Remember him, tonight."

Taran's commander had no need of his sword. Pain spun through Marc's head in pounding waves of darkness. Air howled in his ears and the raw taste of blood gagged over his dry tongue. He'd fought as much as he could for the time being. He wasn't going anywhere fast.

Behind him, as his horse was pulled into a canter up toward the villa, Taran's *equites* dismounted and tried to help Sarnicio's four guards push one injured girl back into her *carpentum*.

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Sunset touched columns of smoke as the many bonfires set around the city crackled, drew and burst upwards. From her raised portico, Marella could see some individual fires beginning, but the main fire at the temple was hidden by distance.

Inside the villa, and in every Celtic home and village, the hearth fire and all the lamps were being doused. Every home would be cold and dark, unwelcoming for the spirits of the dead on this night when they moved among the living.

The guards gave her no time to enjoy the view.

She had been told to dress for the celebrations, and as the day and the old year drew to a close, she was bustled through the villa and into her litter. Taran rode with his men, but made no move to acknowledge her presence. Suelta was not in the party as they moved slowly down the gravel road toward the temple; her injuries left her closer to the dead than to the living.

Peering through the curtain, Marella scanned the towers and outbuildings for any movement or any sign that might tell her where they were holding Marc. Suelta had said Taran would hold him until Sarnicio had seen him. He was somewhere nearby and the knowledge crawled under her skin like a line of ants. She could feel him. Her spirit cried out for him. Her heart ached, reaching through the space between them to touch him.

The Druid had called him her Adonis. Her golden peasant. He was somewhere nearby and his light warmed her.

As they moved out through the gates of the villa and down the road into the city, she pulled the curtains back to watch the start of the night of celebration. People everywhere wore costumes or helmets of twigs and antlers. Men wore fine gowns and silken wigs, their faces whitened, rouged and kohled. On every side there was colour, the beginning of music and joyous movement.

Near the bottom of the hill, where the dense lines of stone block houses crowded in against the road, a group of horsemen caught her eye for their stillness. They clustered tightly together, watching Taran's party moving down toward them with an attitude of grim concentration. Dull brown capes wrapped tightly around each of them.

As they drew closer, Marella climbed forward onto her knees, clinging to the upright beam of the canopy. Even as the air steadily darkened, she could see the rider in the middle had fair hair. It was shorter and fairer, but when she could make out the rider's features, she had no doubt at all she was looking at Marc's brother.

He hunched forward, curled over anger, and a deep frown darkened his brow. He looked like an elemental force, like barely contained violence. Where Marc's face was open, with lines of laughter ready near his mouth and his eyes clear shining blue, this man scowled, and his grey eyes glowered from shadowed depths.

Her study drew the stranger's attention, and as she passed by, he watched her as closely as she watched him. Her mind went blank. She couldn't have remembered his name if her life depended on it. Not even if Marc's life depended on it. Kneeling in the *carpentum*, only a few feet from the rider, she managed to say, "Marc."

When her litter followed Taran's lead down around a corner, between the high stone walls of the houses, she caught a last glimpse of the riders dividing. Two remained on the road down from the villa. Four, led by the angry blonde man, fell quietly in behind her.

***

Slamming the cane back across his stomach, Taran's elite guard prepared Marc for the journey into the city. If fear is the mother of violence, this man was a dutiful son. Terrified of what he didn't know and furious that he'd been made a target for dark influences, he waited patiently for the sound of air rasping back over agony. When the gasping started, he slammed the cane down again, this time over Marc's shoulder. He was already on his knees. He couldn't raise his head. He'd probably had enough to be as docile as a lamb, but the soldier's irritation wasn't sated yet.

Again he waited. The last thing he wanted was for the bastard to pass out. He needed him upright and on a horse. And he needed the Lady Marella to think he looked

well enough to hold back any curses she might have called down. He had left behind too many dead to risk being cursed on a night like this.

"Are you ready to travel?" he asked through his teeth.

Marc made no response. White-hot pain screamed through every nerve in his body. A pulse punched up from the base of his skull as if it would burst the top out of his head. The guard whipped the cane down onto his hand and the whistle and slap made Marc flinch.

"That'll do it for now." The soldier smiled.

Moving to stand beside him, he tied a short noose around Marc's neck and left the end loose, hanging down over his back. "Get up. You have to get on a horse."

He was going outside.

He was heading into the crowded city.

He would have only one guard.

If any of Marella's gods were listening, Luc would be somewhere out there in the crowd. These were the only things that forced his legs to hold him as Marc struggled slowly to his feet. He managed to open his eyes when the guard opened the door and he dragged his feet slowly out toward the stables.

He walked up on hay bales to mount, stepping over into the saddle and waiting silently while the guard caught his hands up behind him and tied them to the noose hanging down over his shoulders. Now if he moved his aching arms, he pulled the noose tighter on his neck. If he lost his balance, he'd choke.

His guard mounted beside him, slipping the cane down into a sheath on his saddle and drawing the long fine blade of his dirk, instead. "You make sure she sees you make an offering," he said. "I can't kill you, there's too many want you alive. But I can make you wish you were dead."

Marc found the strength to nod. This moron was even going to find Marella for him. He had to stay conscious, now.

The broad back of the grey mare he rode made balance that much easier, and she kept her feet so smoothly the pain in his head started to ease. The guard held his reins in front, and he opened his eyes as they neared the bottom of the hill.

Two riders sat in the darkness off to the side of the road. Still and silent.

His guard was intent on making sure Marella saw him, so he wore only a sleeveless tunic over his leggings, and the woad shone for him like a beacon. He wanted to laugh, but there was too much pain in his gut for that. They neared the silent watchers and relief rushed into his blood when he recognized their faces. He laid his head back, looking up into the darkening sky. The thick leather rope at his neck would be easy enough to see, and they would know by the way his arms pulled up behind his back, how he was tied.

Winding through the tightening crowds, he heard the clack of hooves on the cobbles behind him as the riders fell silently in to follow.

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Progress was slow, even for the ducal party, as revellers packed the streets. People followed the light as night claimed their dwellings, leaving the city bonfires as the only illumination.

Crossing the rich business centre where merchant warehouses clumped together and on through the market square, they reached the open plaza that fronted the temple. There, the bonfire threw light up under the temple roof and the heat held people back

against the walls of surrounding buildings. Over the fire, the altar could be seen on the temple steps, wide and full.

Gold and silver lavers dressed their gory libation in sacramental splendour, and baskets were filled to overflowing with pyramids of ripe pomegranates, on and in front of the altar. More baskets lined the temple steps, and once the bonfire had heat reduced enough to begin the ceremony, the crowds would help themselves to the sacred fruits.

The gods were wise. While the celebration and the flesh of pomegranate would encourage procreation, many women would use the ground pulp of the skin to keep that procreation in check.

At stark odds with the press of people in colourful costumes and varying degrees of religious zeal or drunkenness, Roman soldiers stood at arms around the plaza. In full uniform, with shields and pikes, they looked to Marella either bored or bitter. Most wished they were not there or that the celebration would give them an excuse to wet their swords.

Taran had moved on with his horsemen when Sarnicio's guard summoned her from her *carpentum*. She had no wine and no costume. The tight press of the guards as they formed in front, behind, and beside her, moved her steadily, determinedly through the mob and up toward the open fire near the temple steps.

Pain twisted under her ribs, and the jostling jabbed at bruises as she walked. Ignoring the soreness when she could, she turned, craning her neck past the rear guard, searching the surging crowds for a sign of her followers.

Closer to the fire, the heat caught at her throat. Irritation was feeding on her discomfort. It was hard to breathe and difficult to see. Every second step was a stumble as she stepped into the forward guard's sandals.

"Stop," she said as clearly as she could. The guards moved on as if she hadn't spoken, and she locked her knees, stalling in the crowd and saying again, louder, "I said, stop."

This time they did break stride and she was able to turn, to look back the way they had come. "I need a drink. It's too hot up this close to the fire. I want wine before I drop to the ground." Nowhere in the seething sea of faces behind was any trace of the riders she had seen.

The guards Sarnicio had set for her were not young men. None of them showed any softness or compassion in his features, each seemed intent on carrying out a set duty, and her comfort or distress was as inconsequential to them as the crowd.

"Keep moving." The guard beside her wore an intricately carved golden torc over the charcoal of his tunic. The others wore gold, but theirs lacked the detail of the man who spoke. "It's cooler near the steps. Once you're in place, I'll send for wine."

"In place?" Marella's words were ignored, and the solid pressure from behind propelled her back onto their predestined course.

Braver or drunker members of the crowd had already crept in closer to the blaze. Driven by grief or fear, they bore small forms made from reed and willow. Dressed and decorated and doused with blood of the sacrificial stag, the precious wicker characters were thrown high into the fire, taking hopes and blessings for the dead with them to the flames to complete the cycle.

Above Marella's group as they struggled forward, figures moved from the dark recesses of the temple out into the range of the light. Cowled in dark brown rough spun cassocks, the priesthood moved in sedate lines to fall in behind the altar. Marella tripped again as she watched them move, forgetting to time her steps with the guard.

Still the lines came forward. Marella had never seen so many Druids together in one place. Ranks of them.

At the foot of the steps, a tight press of spectators had formed a wedge. Along the temple steps and back to the high wall of the neighbouring building, merchants and richly dressed citizens had been drawn together for the best vantage in the best company.

Beside them a Roman centurion glared into the middle distance, seemingly unaware of the people he was set to guard. His gaze never faltered as a heavy drum beat began and demanded silence.

Slow, reverent, as compelling as a heartbeat, the essential vibration of life itself was taking form.

In the silence between beats, the assembled priests began a murmured incantation. Multitonal vibrations rose and fell linking the beats of life into a sinuous dirge, twisting and lifting like coils of smoke, carrying the sound up into the rising heat of the bonfire.

Caught in rapt attention, the crowd rose with the sound. It grew, spiralling louder into the night, drawing whispered prayers from the lips of those who watched. Shadows seethed with restless spirits as the beat gained impetus, driving heartbeats faster on invisible wings, and the priests' whispered dirge became a thick dissonance. The crowd's unmusical harmonies rose louder and louder until the sound crashed against the ears and the drum beat echoed in every chest.

Then it stopped.

The silence was instantly a blessing and torment. In the vacuum left by the sound's passing, Marella tried to fight down the pulse that gagged at her throat. Her heartbeat had followed the drum, faster and faster, her breathing was taxed and she hunched over her bruises.

At her elbow, a wineskin appeared, startling her from her fixed stare at the stage. The guard behind her jerked, grabbing the wrist that held the skin, embarrassed at having been caught unaware. The peasant who held the wine, stood back, his palms open, disconcerted by the guard's annoyance.

Marella looked to the guard and carefully took the wineskin, lifting it to her lips to drink, as all four of Sarnicio's elites considered the man and dismissed him as harmless. Shaking so she thought she might fall, Marella drank again, then turned to hand back the skin. The man had vanished, his simple brown cape blending into the crowd like a ghost. But they knew where she was.

A drum sounded, and Marella jumped again.

A lone figure strode into the silent clearing on the stage. A spectacular curve of ibex horns on his head made him seem ten feet tall. Rising from his groin to his shoulders through the open front of his robe, a massive silver phallus thrust unashamedly, drawing groans of awe from the enthralled crowd.

Priests stepped forward, lifting the black robe from their Lord's shoulders, opening his opalescent skin to the fire's keen light.

Marella gaped. Although he stood perfectly still, the firelight on his painted skin made him appear to ripple and change before her eyes. A long false beard tangled to his waist, but standing naked, it could not conceal his features well enough to confuse her.

Leucetius revelled in the crowd's amazement, drinking in the power, the essence of the Horned God himself. Raising his arms above his head, he began his own incantation, calling the spirits of the dead, drawing them to follow him into the underworld.

His voice rang as clearly as flint on crystal and every eye stayed on him. Gathering the neckline of her *tunica* up tight against her throat, Marella fought nausea and the urge to run. It may have been a costume, exaggerated for ceremonial display, but the sight of

her rapist, naked but for his mighty phallus, reduced her to a quivering mass, near to hysteria.

Her knees had set; her gut roiled, hot with dread.

Frantically, she tore her gaze from him, searching the crowd for the riders, for rescue. ‘Help me’, the words rose in her throat, but her tongue was too dry. She had no breath to cry out. Groping, she reached to push her fingers and hands out between her guards, trying to force a space through which she could escape.

The commander caught her wrist and glared down into her eyes.

“Help me,” she begged in a dry hiss. “Please.”

His eyes held her answer. He started to grin as the man behind her moved forward, shoving her closer to the stage. Closest to where they stood, the line of priests was curving forward to form a long alleyway. Sarnicio’s guards were pushing her, stumbling against her locked knees and mortification, up one step, two steps, into the waiting hands of Leucetius’ priesthood.

Marc. She wanted to cry out, to beg for her only safety. His face and his name filled her consciousness and she needed to scream for him. He would rescue her again. But he was hurt. And he was far too far away.

[top]

CHAPTER FOURTEEN.

Marc steadied himself, counting breaths to keep from slipping deeper into the burning darkness at his feet. The heat of the fire was too intense. He was dehydrated, weak with nausea and on his feet by force of will alone. Marella was in the city somewhere but he had no idea where. And Luc. With any luck at all, Luc was here somewhere too.

Standing just behind and beside him, his guard held the noose at his neck like a leash and pressed close in the crowd to speak in confidence. “We won’t have to stand here long,” he said. Sweat that grew from more than the heat of the fire bloomed over his brows and on his lip. He was genuinely terrified.

Good, Marc thought, and counted breaths slowly one, two, three.

On stage, a priest had stolen the show with an impressive silver member and a piercingly sweet song, but Marc had no interest in seeing or hearing the act. Every time the crowd surged, his knees threatened to give way. The guard had pushed them forward, exposed them to the worst heat of the fire so he could see the stage clearly. He was waiting now, and Marc had lost any confidence he had that he would survive the night.

The rope jerked at his neck and he opened his eyes.

“This bit,” his captor hissed. Despite his fear, he seemed amused by what he anticipated seeing. “Watch for her. You make sure she can see you, and you make sure she knows I brought you here. Understand?”

Marc didn’t understand. Marella was nowhere to be seen.

At the far side of the stage, some sort of upset started and the priests moved from their ranks behind the altar, down toward the step. They were dragging someone up as the shining priest in the middle began to move in their direction down the stage.

His heart stumbled. He fixed his blurred fury on Marella as the Druids formed a cordon around her and moved her steadily into the middle of the stage to meet the silver priest.

“There,” said his captor. “When she looks this way, you make sure.”

He stopped speaking abruptly, tugging once on the noose and standing silently beside his prisoner.

“Marc,” Lucius spoke directly into his ear, using their native Celtic tongue for privacy. “Come on. Let’s go.”

Marc turned. His captor’s eyes stayed open, his expression vaguely surprised, but he stood slumped between two men like a contented drunk. The crowd saw nothing but a sharp punch to the back of his neck as they studied the spectacular unfolding on stage. A small chisel had severed his brainstem in an instant, and he sagged into the ready embrace of his killers.

Luc flicked a knife up into his brother’s bindings and freed the noose. He had swung the cape from his own shoulders and draped it over Marc as he tugged his tunic, urging him to follow.

Another cape covered his guard’s uniform, and already Luc’s men were moving their burden back against the flow of spectators and away from the stage.

Marc looked back to the stage. He couldn’t speak, his mouth felt blistered and raw. His foot dragged as he tried to turn. There was nothing he could do to save her at this moment. Snatching a goblet from a startled onlooker, he downed the drink in one and leaned on Luc’s shoulder. “She’s on the stage. Get up there,” he managed. “Let her see you.”

“Okay, in a minute. Can you walk?”

Marc shot him a look that said everything he couldn’t. Yes. No. Maybe. Leaning on his brother, he pushed back through the crowd to where the shadows held the fire’s fierce heat at bay.

Taran watched his sister struggle. She was too shocked and too weak to make a fight of it, and he looked on dispassionately. She might have been an ant stuck in a drip of honey for all he cared. He would have preferred her dead, but if Sarnicio had decided to give her to the Druid then there was precious little he could do about it.

The Horned God could take his pick of women tonight, and his choice had been an easy one. Taran watched the costumed Druid posturing in the fire’s glare and laughed. “Well now you little whore,” he mumbled under his breath, “that one should satisfy you.” He laughed again and took a goblet of wine from the tray held at his elbow. It was done for now. Tonight he could relax and drink with his fellow soldiers -- he looked around the crowd appreciatively – and enjoy the abundant pleasures already on offer.

He nudged Jura Torres in the ribs with an elbow, tilting his head to indicate a full-breasted wench in the crowd. Deceitful whores, all of them. The thought stole the night’s enjoyment from him for a moment. But only for a moment.

Marella stayed where she was put. Horror left her rigid, petrified. The worst of her nightmares could not have plumbed these depths.

Ahead of her an ocean of faces celebrated her selection, encouraging the Great Hunter to take his prize. If her legs had carried her, she might have thrown herself into the depths of the bonfire and let its pure heat clean the filth of his touch from her skin and her flesh and her bones, let it scour him from her soul.

Leucetius’ feet seemed barely to touch the stonework. He sailed on elation. More than once Marella saw arrhythmic shudders rush over his abdomen, straightening his back and clenching his buttocks in rapture. And still the ceremony went on.

When he approached she could smell him, the vile sweet-sickly smell of sweat and lust. In his hand was a wide golden chalice filled with ruby hued pomegranate; its juice stained his fingers and dripped from the base of the grail.

He thrust the lip to hers, and she clamped her mouth shut, glaring cold hatred at him. She would take nothing from him, ever, without a struggle. Her resistance reached past his delirious beatitude and he laughed. Taking a pinch of the red pips in his fingers, he pushed them between her clenched jaws.

Marella twisted her chin from his hand and spat the seeds into his face. The crowd roared and the Druid groaned, his breath a ragged pant of ecstasy. Once again he forced the sacred pips between her tight lips. Knotting his fingers in her hair, he pulled her hard against his mouth and kissed her until her lips bled juice.

"Fight me, my dear," he panted into her hair. "It's so much more fun when you fight me." Holding her hair in one hand, he held her body in close so the cold metal of his phallus reached from her belly up between her breasts.

The crowd erupted as the lines of priests moved down the steps and out into their midst, handing out sacred fruit and clearing the way for the final farewell of the Horned God and his chosen bride. With him, all the year's departed would go joyously to the otherworld to eat and drink and fornicate.

Now was the time for those left behind to do the same.

Marella ripped her glare from her tormentor's face, sneering her disgust at the crowd who cheered him on.

Standing apart, frozen between rushing to her side and recognizing the impossible odds of that attempt, the blonde rider held Leucetius with a look of unmitigated disgust. A scowl as black as ruin left his grey eyes glowing in the reflected firelight. He jabbed one finger at the priest, and turned to make his way quickly back through the crowd.

Leucetius grabbed her wrist and dragged her stumbling into the cover of the temple. With one look, Marc's brother had succeeded in knocking some of the brutal self-assurance from him. But he'd fuelled his rage to the point of insanity. Shoving her ahead of him down steps that led into utter darkness, he howled in exasperation, "You're mine now. Mine." As if she hadn't heard him, he snapped her around to face him, screaming into her face, "Mine!"

The darkness around her was too thick to see, but Marella heard him ranting and stamping, his movements made jerky and awkward by his rage.

The great Ibex horns were mounted on a metal frame, which moulded down behind his head and around his neck, their weight spread over his shoulders and down his back. Removing the apparatus was a job for two men, but he dropped her wrist, grunted in pain as he twisted free of its weight, and dropped the precious icon to the stone.

Feeling the blackness, fanning her hands behind her hips, she backed away from his panting, holding her breath to keep it from wheezing in her own ears. Slowly, with courage learned in nightmares, she moved through the black void.

The clang of metal on stone shocked a rash onto her skin, as he dropped the silver phallus to the floor. He was still panting, his breath roaring in the darkness like a storm. "Good girl," he whispered. "We'll play. You hide."

Whimpers burned in her mouth, but Marella forced herself silent, biting her bruised lip. She couldn't afford to trip, but neither could she remain too close. He could sweep his arms around and find her at any second. He knew this place. She didn't. Dropping down into a crouch, she pulled her *tunica* up to keep from tripping, and felt for the way they'd come in. If she could find the stairs, she might get up into the light.

All the fires, every lamp and candle in the city, had been doused. Not a single light burned in the huge temple complex. None could be lit until moonset and then only by a flame taken from the sacred bonfire. Marella felt her way into a corner, smoothed her

fingers over the two walls where they joined, and turned to prop herself against the cold stone.

What would Marc do? His brother was the commander, where was he now? They were out there somewhere, and they knew she was in the temple. But she couldn't guess what condition Marc was in, and there seemed no way so few men could make it past the legion of priests that attended the temple for the festival.

She crumpled the fabric of her dress up into a wad over her mouth and let her hot breath in and out, muffled by the cloth.

A stumble in the darkness shocked through her, and Leucetius swore then laughed again, calling, "Marella. Come and play now." He was moving away from her, his voice echoing in the darkness.

Above her, right above her head, the sound of footsteps sliding over flagging rushed away into silence and she peered up through the ink. The door was above her. She had to be beside the stairs. Carefully pushing herself upright, she reached straight up the wall. Biting her lip again, her fingers trembled over the stone, moving sideways until they found an edge, and a flat tread. She'd found the stairs.

Leucetius called for her, he was moving closer again and terror burned hot and sharp in her skin. Should she crouch? Should she wait for him to start moving away again, and then try to run up the stairs and away? Should she leap up now and surprise him?

Her knees shook. Her whole body felt weak with the exhaustion of shock. She wasn't sure her legs would carry her up the stairs but she had to try. She closed her eyes and let herself slide to the floor again, waiting while he scanned the night for the heat of her body.

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Marc lowered himself to the ground, letting his shoulders slide down the cool stone of a wall. "You have to get back into the temple and find her."

He looked up at his brother, frowning as Luc shook his head. "Can't," he said, pushing his fingers through the stubble on his chin. "There's at least a hundred Druids up there, a *Centuria* in the plaza, probably a whole cohort in the city area, and five hundred drunk civillians, all cheering for the god. I'm not walking back into that temple and you're not walking anywhere."

"What then? Sit here and wait?"

Beside him, a man dropped to a squat and held out a flask of wine. When Marc took it to drink, he lifted the front of Marc's tunic and whistled between his teeth. "What did they hit you with?" The question needed no answer. Until a year ago, Marc had lived and worked with the five men who accompanied his brother. These were Luc's staff, all ex-soldiers. "Where can we get you meds? Is there a physician?"

Marc watched his brother for a moment before responding. He slouched away into the shadows, hands on his hips, standing with his back to the huddle of men. He was thinking.

"The villa," Marc answered at last. "There's no one left up there. The *dux,* Taran di Lusone is in that crowd somewhere. His wife carries a medical kit bigger than any company physician. She'll be there alone if she's not dead."

The urge to rush his brother's thoughts burned in Marc's chest. He lifted the flask to his mouth, groaning at the effort. Taran's guard may have fed him well, but they took no chances with him making an escape. He was near to useless. When all of the wine

was gone, he could, at least, breathe again. If he moved slowly, he could twist. When he was sure he wouldn't fall, he pushed himself back to his feet.

"Who is she?" Luc walked closer, his brow clenched over long odds.

"The *dux'* sister, Marella."

"He's not rushing to help?"

"He put her there. It's a three way deal between the Arevaci warlord, di Lusone and the Druid."

Luc didn't ask how Marc fitted in, and Marc didn't explain the intricacies of the problem. He'd be asked for the information that was needed.

"Can she ride?"

"No."

"Can you?"

"No. Not any distance."

"We'll need to go to ground," Luc decided.

"Have you seen the country around here? There isn't a tree. There is no cover. Every farm house in the region is full."

"You don't make it easy."

"I didn't plan any of it." Marc laughed, then regretted it.

"So, we're staying in town. How many men has di Lusone got with him?"

"A dozen. Cavalry elites. Veterans, all of them."

"Eleven." Luc smiled and nodded toward the corpse of Torres' second-in-command, his scowl lightening for a moment.

"Sarnicio di Arevaci has four special guards on Marella, too. Di Lusone's men don't like it. They're out there in the crowd somewhere."

"Okay. You need to get on a horse and get back up to the villa. Get yourself doped up a bit." Luc stepped back, searching the sky for a clear view of the new moon. "They won't have lights until after moonset. We'll go back and try to find a way to pull her out."

"Can't," Marc said calmly.

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Marella stayed in her crouch. She wanted to run, every muscle in her body wanted to run, but none of them would move.

The Druid no longer made simpering jokes about playing games. His voice when he spoke was ice cold and dangerous. He had tired of chasing his prey. Her silence infuriated him, being unable to find her frustrated him. "You can't go anywhere, Marella. You belong to the gods tonight. You know that. I chose you; the crowd won't let you go; it would risk all their blessings for the year."

He was right. Everyone in the crowd would be watching for her tonight. She'd been honoured by the god's choice. Even if she got out of the room, she'd never get out of the temple. Tears filled her eyes. It was hopeless.

Huddled in the darkness, she closed her eyes and held the memory of finding hope in the warmth of Marc's embrace. Deliberately, she wrapped her arms tight about herself, as if he was right there to hold her and give her strength. Turning her face down, she pressed her mouth against her arm and recalled the warm honeyed taste of his kisses.

He'd been so angry. So very angry. But he was her only light, her only hope, and he wouldn't let her feel hopeless. He would tell her to fight.

Leucetius moved away again, combing back across to the other side of the room. Terror made her stomach hot and heavy. Her legs felt like pins and needles, her knees and ankles were numb. She was holding her breath again.

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Luc watched the plaza.

The uniformed men who had stood guard around Marella had dispersed.

Druids moved up and down the stairs of the temple, handing out pomegranates, holding out the sacrificial blood to drench the wicker men.

The Centurion of the Roman guard stood at his post nearest the step. He'd posted men at regular intervals all around the plaza, but they were at about half strength, maybe thirty-five or forty men. Bored men. Men who'd enjoy an excuse for blood.

Luc had sent two of his men back to hold the horses ready but he'd made no plan yet. They were playing this by ear in a situation that seemed impossible. Intuition was evolving toward a course of action as he silently assessed the choices they had before them. There was only one way to get into the temple. Only the host of Druids were free to enter and leave at will. He took a moment to watch the ebb and flow of the crowd, then held three fingers up to his men, pointed at an alleyway between the temple and its courtyard wall and started moving casually toward the shadows of the alley.

Working with quiet competence, Luc's men isolated and steered three doomed and unsuspecting Druids into the alley and to their deaths. Quickly Luc pulled the sleeves of a priest's cassock up his arms and watched as Marc threw the third, spare cassock over his shoulder under the stolen robe he wore. Then, together, the brothers walked calmly up the stairs into the dark temple as priests.

Doorways led from the antechamber, and an empty hallway stretched ahead into the bowels of the building. Luc walked straight toward the hall, pointing to his left and Marc moved to the dark doorways there. Silence clung to the smooth stone. The only sound in the building was the scuff of their own feet over the flagging.

It was impossible. They'd already wasted too much time. If they felt their way through every room, they'd be still searching by morning. In the sparse light of the entrance, Luc shrugged.

Marc put a finger to his lips and pointed to the main hallway again. He touched an ear, and both men moved silently toward the suggestion of a sound. The sound repeated, and Marc allowed himself to grin. There was no humour in it.

As they moved down the hallway, they left the last of the light, but Leucetius kept speaking, and that was all they needed.

"Let me tell you what I'm going to do to you, my lovely."

Marc ground his teeth as the Druid slowly articulated his desires. The voice was coming from below. They were down a flight of stairs, but more than that he couldn't tell. The urgent desire to pull Leucetius' hands away from her skin dragged on his nerves as he forced himself to feel his way silently to the door.

"Don't hide from me, Marella. You will have to learn to do as I tell you." He laughed, but he wasn't happy. "When you're my wife there won't be anywhere for you to hide. You'll be mine. Every day. Every night. I'll have you whenever I want you."
He didn't have her. If Marella was down in the dark with the Druid, she was hiding and he couldn't find her.

Pre-empting him with a gamble Marc would never have taken, Luc called through the dark doorway, "Marella."

He was right. They had to know where she was. If the Druid had to hold her, they'd know where both of them were and he wouldn't be able to fight. But the thought of handing her to him made Marc's stomach lurch.

"Marc." The hope and fear and relief in her voice ripped his heart, as Luc jumped down the stairs ahead of him. They had to get to the Druid before he could call for help.

Marella whimpered, her sob sending adrenaline coursing through Marc's system, firming tired muscles and numbing his awareness of pain. He wouldn't risk the jump, but his feet found the stairs and he rushed down into the dark room. There were grunts to his right, a scuffle. "No blood," he warned, and spun to the sound of movement behind him. "Marella?"

She sobbed and he felt her fingertips reaching for him through the darkness. Relief rushed through him and he pulled her in against his chest and wrapped his arms around her. "Are you hurt?"

There was no answer as she pressed herself into him, trembling and sobbing softly.

Marella couldn't speak. In desperate silence she clung to the rough fabric of the robe he wore, letting his warmth and strength and the healing smell of him fill her and cover all the raw and exposed nerves in her body.

Hysterical screams echoed in her head and sobs burned up into her throat, but there was safety in Marc's arms and, somehow, she found the courage to hold the clamour down inside and trust him to keep the terrors far enough away.

The noises to the side had stopped; the priest had no chance to beg for his life. Marc grunted and flinched when Luc slapped his back. "Give her the robe and let's go."

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Suelta clutched the covers up to her face, and Marella pushed into the room ahead of the men, anxious to reassure her friend before fear overcame her.

"It's all right," she said quickly. "They're with me." Marella turned, pushing them back from the bedchamber. Feeling through the darkness, she lifted the heavy trunk of medications from the table beside the bed and handed it out to Luc.

Suelta was dazed, her bruised eyes closing slowly as she pressed a bloodless hand over her heart. "I won't even ask what you have done, this time." Her words were grit and vapour, but she managed a small sad smile. Her tone said the situation had deteriorated past tears. Now only laughter would suffice.

"It's worse than you could imagine, Suelta. I can't see any way out of it, now. Leucetius is dead. I can't run anywhere, I just can't. And Marc is in no condition to ride. They've come back here for drugs, but Taran will be back sooner or later. They'll be found. Leucetius will be found." The night's events had caught Marella up in a rising tide of panic and hopelessness. Every time she believed it couldn't get worse, it did. Every time she believed she'd been pulled to safety, trouble rose to meet her.

Without light or servants, the comfortable villa seemed exposed and dangerous. Through the open window, the new moon refused more than the barest comfort, but it found the cadaverous planes of Suelta's face and cast them back like a foretelling. "Help me up, Marella. Nothing's decided, yet."

Marella did what she could to support her as her sister struggled to walk down to the outer room, and the men there stepped aside respectfully as she made her way to a couch.

"Get some light." Luc spoke in the shadows and Suelta pulled the shreds of her strength together.

“You will not. Don’t bring light into this house. Not tonight.” Wheezing in the darkness, she sipped from a goblet and said, “Tell me everything. Who is dead? Who knows you are here?”

Marc answered, “Torres’ second-in-command is dead, three Druids, and the High Priest. No one knows we’re here. Taran and his party are still at the temple. They won’t find Leucetius until moonset at the soonest. If nobody goes looking for him, maybe not until morning.

“Sarnicio’s guards will still think Marella’s with the Horned God. As far as I know, no one knew the guard was taking me into the city. No one but you knew Luc was coming.” His tongue was already sounding thicker and the words trailed away as he ran out of breath.

Forcing her eyelids wide to catch every mote of light, Marella followed her heart across the room to where he sat. She made herself stand a little apart, but she reached through the darkness to slip her fingers onto his shoulder.

“Well, there is no problem, then.” Suelta let her sigh run softly into the silence. “I haven’t been blind and deaf for twenty years.”

No one spoke.

Marella drew a breath as if she might question the statement, but in the end she said nothing and eventually Suelta spoke again, slowly and painfully. “Taran will not come home until morning. Marella will be at home with me when he does. Her guest will be locked in his room, and his family envoy will arrive tomorrow to petition for his release. There is a protocol for these things, and with Sarnicio here, those protocols will be followed to the letter.

“If the Arevaci guards cannot keep track of one young woman, that’s their own shame. If Taran’s man and some priests died during the celebrations, what is that to do with us? As for that vile Druid, he was alive and sleeping when Marella left him to make her way home alone. They can doubt that, but let them prove she killed him.”

Luc broke in, “His neck’s broken.”

“Good.” Suelta’s voice was slipping away. Every word had a cost, but she sipped and persevered. “Tomorrow, when Taran goes to Sarnicio, he will be more determined than ever to have Marella dead. But he won’t dare to act on that until the *princep* gives his blessing. That will buy us time, and a lot can be accomplished in a very few minutes.

“I will go with them.” The way she articulated the last sentence suggested she believed she could make a difference. But Marella knew she had also believed that grovelling would change Sarnicio’s mind. They’d both been wrong on that score.

“There is one more thing. The Romans. I understand from what Marella tells me that you hate them as much as we do, but Sarnicio will indulge them.” If she waited for Luc to confirm or deny her assertion, the time was wasted. “You will have to leave before the Roman nobleman gets here. He may be a month away, but you cannot know how he will travel or when he will arrive.”

Luc looked to Marc. Marc looked to Marella. “Your tribune is on his way from Gallia Aquitania,” she said. “He’s the reason the Romans held you at Nertobriga. Taran and Leucetius reported you as a deserter in Saragossa, and it seems he was already looking for you.”

Marc nodded.

Luc moved to his side and clasped his hand. “We’ll go back into the city tonight and see what we can learn. If he is already here, we’ll find him.” He turned. “Ladies.” If he nodded it was lost in the shadows, and he left with his men.

[top]

CHAPTER FIFTEEN.

Marella followed down open paths to the room where Marc was to wait.

Away from the main buildings of the villa, the servant's quarters were formed from undressed stone and they merged organically into the stables and storage silos. Even with the door standing open to the spare moonlight, the space seemed too small. When he turned, the distance between them was awkward. Too close for polite conversation, too far apart to embrace without taking an intentional step.

Darkness hid his features, his feelings.

Marella was too lost for pride. Too many times she'd insulted him, dishonoured him. He'd been so very angry. But he deserved more than silence and doubt.

Her heartbeat was deafening. Cool breezes carried the sounds of revelry up from the valley below, but they didn't lift the heat from her skin. Wisps of hair tickled over her shoulders, calling gooseflesh up her throat. Fear had settled in her knees and fingers; it sat heavily in her stomach and her lips trembled as she tried to meet his eyes.

Marc stepped forward, raising a hand to slip loose hair back from her temple, and she turned her cheek into his palm and kissed it.

She needed words, a way to explain. He'd believed she would use her body as a bargaining chip. Even as payment. And because she'd lacked the courage to tell him about her baby, now he would think she intended to coerce him into taking responsibility for her choices.

He would have been right in all cases, but for all the wrong reasons. He'd been so angry. And she'd been so afraid.

"I don't know what to say, Marc," she said at last. There were too many questions, too many answers she needed to hear and her pulse beat so hard her whole body throbbed with it. "I want to ask if you're all right and if I can help you. And I want to tell you I'm sorry and that I was so scared you were dead. So scared. I want to beg you not to be angry with me."

"I'm not angry," he said, and he stepped back into the small room. Dark splatters marked the white plaster. It was blood. His blood.

"You should be." She dropped the wineskin she carried to the floor and moved to touch her fingertips to the marks on the wall. "Why wouldn't you be? In Nertobriga…" she paused self-consciously. In Nertobriga every truth she'd known, every hope she'd ever held, had fallen to ash or bloomed into golden light. She rushed on, saying "I should have told you. There's no excuse, I know. But I wasn't trying to trap you or force you into taking care of me."

Marc had used the wall for support as he knelt down onto the straw mattress, and when she rushed back to him, he caught hold of her arm. "What world do you live in?"

Pulling on her wrist so her face came down to his level, he said, "If you wanted to trap or force anyone to do anything, you were backing the wrong horse with me. I didn't think you were. I didn't take any more than you offered freely and I surely don't think you took anything from me that I wasn't happy to give."

He let her go and she stepped back, rubbing her wrist.

Groaning, he lowered himself down to lay flat on the hard straw. "If I'd thought we were making bargains, I'd have checked the details first."

Marella stared down at where he lay. He'd crossed his arms over his eyes and his mouth was a grim line. He had no patience tonight. No smile.

It was hard to know what hurt more. Thinking he believed she'd wanted to use him like that, or knowing he didn't care. "It was nothing to you, then?"

He moved his hands and his eyes widened in genuine surprise. "Now you've gone from one extreme to the other." He moved to get up onto his elbows, but changed his mind. "Come down here where I can see you. Do we have to go through this now?"

She knelt, then sat beside him. "Yes. I don't know what will happen tomorrow. I need to understand. You knew I wanted you to stay...."

He cut her off. "No, I hoped you wanted me to stay, I just hung around until I was sure." He smiled and she relaxed enough to draw a breath.

"Then," she continued, "when I told you about the baby, you were so angry."

He frowned deeply and reached to touch her arm. "Torres stuck me in a cellar at an orchard somewhere near Nertobriga, and I'd lay there at night and think about how I could apologize enough for that. When I wasn't wondering if I'd live to see you again.

"I was wrong. I had no right to say anything. Your choices are none of my business. I'm sorry."

Marella stared into the murk. He was speaking another language and it had nothing to do with Latin. She stroked his long fingers, running her fingertips over his skin and around the curve of his nails. Touching him sent shivers up her arm that gathered like a hot breath on her back. She longed to reach out, to touch his cheek and trace the strong line of his jaw, but he confused her. She needed certainty. Too much had happened. There were too many cracks in her understanding of the world.

"I don't understand," she said. The confusion he caused scared her more than not knowing what tomorrow would bring. "I made it your business. That's why you were angry. Isn't it?"

She'd understood what he'd said, she was sure of that.

She'd made herself plain, she was sure of that.

She'd only seen two options, she could abort the child and return to the temple or she could find a man who would care for her and the child.

She'd tried to tell him that she knew her options were grim.

She'd tried to tell him she hadn't made love to him to obligate him.

She'd wanted to tell him she'd never once considered the possibility she might make a life for herself alone, but he never gave her a chance. "Didn't you think I'd tried to make you take responsibility for me? I thought you believed I'd slept with you so you'd feel obliged to care for us?" She stopped to stare at his look of horror. "What did you think I was doing?"

He gave a short sharp laugh. "I thought you were scared you'd wake up dead. It's amazing how that sort of fear can make you need to feel warm skin beside you."

"Is that it? And you were happy with that? You didn't make any judgments about me?"

He shook his head and she dropped his hand. "Do you have any standards that are important enough to uphold no matter what, or is anarchy your only principle?"

He was silent for a long time, long enough for her to start forming answers for him. She had time to consider the first time she'd seen him, every day that she'd known him, every mile that they'd crossed together, and every time she'd insulted him.

When he answered, it was as if he hadn't heard her last question. He twisted slowly and pushed himself up to sit propped against the wall and took a long sip from the wineskin. "What judgment should I have made?" he asked, his voice low with emotion. "I refused to bed you when you thought it was the only way I'd help you, but I'd never refuse a whore. That shouldn't surprise you, you said as much yourself."

"Marc, I," she didn't get a chance to apologize.

"I have some principles. Like I told you, I'd prefer to live or die for something important. I don't think I need to be paid to do something that's right. If I have to fight,

I'd rather fight someone who can fight back." He took another long swig of wine, letting the rich red flow wash down his neck.

"I was angry because I heard you say no man was going to want you so you'd have to go and hide your face in shame. You had to abort your baby and live in misery in the temple, you said, because that was the only way the people of your world would accept you. Well, that would be another of my principles, right there. I wouldn't kill a baby just to save my social standing. Not when you have other choices."

Marella choked out her words, "I didn't think I had any other choices. I couldn't see any way around it. You see the world differently than me. You've had more practice at this." She punched down on her own thigh. "That's what I've been trying to tell you."

"No," he said. "Don't tell me about what I do, or how I don't fit. Tell me about you. Tell me what it was you did want when you decided I was good enough to share your bed after all. You didn't want to trap me and it wasn't something as unforgivably human as fear, so what?"

She didn't need to see the ice in his eyes; she could hear the shake in his breathing and feel the tension in the air between them. She wanted to hold onto him, to feel his warmth pressed against her. She wanted to hold his face in her hands and take back the pain she'd caused. Again.

But there wasn't even a safe way to hold him. Her own aches and bruises were like scratches compared to what she had seen, and she had no idea how bad the injuries under his tunic were now. His blood had sprayed across the wall.

Tensions whined in the back of her throat, frustrations craving expression. There was still no easy place to start and his anger made her want to run, but there was nowhere to go. She couldn't share Suelta's faith that they would survive the morning, and everything that mattered to her was in this room, now. There was no point in trying to find somewhere else to hide.

"I wanted you," she rushed out. "You're my only hope. Not because I need you to rescue me, because you see things differently." Frustration made her punch her knee again. How could she describe her whole life and the terror of turning her back on everything she had ever believed?

"I believe there are rules, and structures and standards. Everyone has a place and a role and expectations. When you're born to a noble family, yes you have more than others do, but so much more is expected of you. The actions of one person affect the standing of the whole family.

"Men fight and drink and whore; women raise their families and keep their homes and are discreet. It's the way of things. It doesn't change. Everyone knows what they have to do."

Her eyes implored him through the shadows. More than anything, she needed him to look past his own preconceptions. All his life he'd questioned everything. How could she explain what it was like to live without ever questioning the rules that governed her life?

"My shame is the whole family's shame. It is better for one person to die than to bring everyone into disrepute. That's how I've always lived. It's what I always believed. You're the first person who ever so much as suggested it didn't have to be that way. Marc, please try to understand. I'm not asking you to agree, just to understand that I never questioned the way things have always been for us."

"You never thought it was unfair that you should be a scapegoat, when you did no wrong and the men who did walked away free?" His tone had softened, but the cold anger still shivered in his voice.

“It’s not about fair, of course it’s unfair. It’s about reputations and discretion and scandal. It’s unfair and frustrating and heart breaking, and if I’d been able to find any honourable solution, I’d have taken it. I tried to find one, you know that. You were there.

“And I was never blameless. I should have refused Sarnicio. I knew better, but I was a child and I still believed in men who loved passionately and women who were adored and people who lived happily ever after.”

“Sarnicio was the man who paid for your consecration?”

“Yes.” She straightened her back, accepting her own measure of guilt. And foolishness. Acknowledging her shame was the only way she could explain her choices to him. There was no longer anything to hide.

“You fell in love with the *princep* and when he was finished with the relationship you had to be hidden because of the shame?”

“No. He arranged a good marriage, to his nephew. I didn’t accept that, though. I thought if I refused and threatened to join the temple he’d realize how much I loved him and he’d marry me himself.”

Through the darkness, Marc laughed quietly. Even if she was struggling to explain how it affected him, she knew he’d begun to understand the constraints she had faced. “What’s the downside for the men in this society,” he asked. “I can’t see any so far. I should come to live in a palace in Caesaraugusta myself.”

She shrugged. This side of it he should understand, surely. “Duty,” she said simply. “Men fight. They protect our homes and our lands and our wealth and our people.

“Our whole society is based around our noble elites, our warlords. It always has been. Men like Taran have a duty to protect his lands, and the men who fight with him are all devoted soldiers. They have a duty to protect him or to die in the attempt.”

Marc shook his head and drank again from the wineskin. “Every society has its warriors, Marella. Every place in the empire. Every place before the empire and outside the empire. Not all women accept the sort of treatment you do.

“Your sister is dying, do you know that? She’s bleeding inside; her lips are too pale; she drinks constantly. And your noble brother did that to his own wife.”

“Yes.” There was no more she could say in Taran’s defence. She understood him. She could no longer forgive him.

He sat with his head back against the wall, staring up at the roof somewhere above. He could never accept it. But that wasn’t what she needed from him.

“You understand what I’m trying to tell you, don’t you? About living in a world where you do not question standards of right and wrong? Where death is better than shame?”

“Aye.”

“Then try to understand what it was like for me to meet you and have you say I deserve to live. That I don’t have to go anywhere or do anything I don’t want to do. I wasn’t trying to tell you I wanted to abort the baby. I was trying to say I couldn’t face a world that made it my only choice. I had no hope. The whole world was just a dark pit of despair. All my choices were awful. Death didn’t seem such a bad thing.

“You gave me hope. You’re like a light in the darkness. You made me see things in a completely different way. But I’m only learning. I can’t do it yet. It’s still too hard to break the rules.”

If he hadn’t held the wineskin, resting his wrists on his knees, she might have believed him asleep. He was utterly still and silent. Not even the sound of his breathing reached towards her.

The room was darkening as the moon set. She had to try to finish. “In Nertobriga, I was scared. Scared of dying and of all the things that were worse than death.

“And scared of you.”

That moved him. He was no more than a shadow in the darker air, but he raised his head. Although she couldn’t see his eyes, she could feel them studying her. She was as invisible to him as he was to her, but she felt naked in front of him.

The thought made her breath catch and her heart pound against her ribs. Once again she ached to reach and touch him, to feel the warm reality of his flesh. She gripped her own hands and let one dry breath stutter over her tongue, before she closed her mouth and eyes tight.

She had explained everything she could explain. Now she could only lay her bare heart open to him.

“You’re still scared of me?”

“More than ever,” she whispered. Before her fear could cloud her eyes with tears or force her throat to close, she said, “In Nertobriga, I thought we would be caught. Whether we died, or worse, I knew in the end you were right. None of it mattered. If you were the only man in the world who was gentle, and warm and cared whether I was alive or not, then in the end it didn’t matter who you were. And if I wanted to hope that a man as decent and honourable as you might want me, even for a little while, in the end, it didn’t matter if there would be no tomorrow.”

She stopped to clear her throat, wishing she could see his face, or that he would speak, tell her what he was thinking. He remained perfectly still.

Taking one final shaky breath, she finished, “But that frightened me the most. Because it did matter to me. More than I let myself believe. It mattered more than I dared to hope.”

The night crowded close and only the distant sound of the city’s celebration moved the air. Nerves jerked at the muscles in her cheek and her lip trembled. While she could stand it, she waited.

“I can’t see your face,” she said softly. “Tell me what you’re thinking. Tell me you believe me.”

“I believe you.” His voice was drawn thin, strained in ways she had never heard before. The words were quiet, calm as they always were, but she couldn’t hear his certainty. “I told you I couldn’t offer you any solutions.

“I don’t know how I feel. There’s a place inside that hurts and it has nothing to do with bruises. Being near you eases that pain. Even thinking about you helps. But since I met you it’s been hard to think more than a day ahead. We haven’t had a very bright future to consider.”

He’d smiled; she could hear it and she crept forward, resting her hands on his knees. “It still isn’t bright,” she said. “But it isn’t hopeless. Not if I know you’re there for me.” Warmth washed through her and her chest tightened around her breath. Hesitantly, moving slowly in the dark, she leaned forward and brought her lips to his. Heat flushed under her skin, up her throat and into her cheeks.

His kiss was soft, and the taste of his mouth fuelled the burn. She rested her cheek against his. “I don’t want to leave you here,” she murmured. “Let me stay with you tonight.”

Groaning softly, he moved to kiss her jaw and the hollow of her throat below her ear. His lips touched her skin like the kiss of flame. His hands were warm on her arms; her breath caught as he slipped his fingertips over the bare skin of her shoulder. Again, a small breathless moan crept from his throat. “It’s the dark,” he said. “It must be. You just offered to sleep on the floor in the servants’ quarters.”

“Don’t.” She licked her lips. “I don’t care if Taran comes home. If we’re going to die anyway, I’d rather be with you tonight. I don’t want to go back into the villa.”

“You have to.” Carefully, he pressed her shoulders back until her face was in front of his. “We’re not dead yet. But ours aren’t the only lives at stake now. If Luc can see any chance in this idea of your sister’s, or if he thinks he can use Cilo’s influence to get us out of this, I’ll trust his call. Unless I hear different from him, he’s expecting you to be in the house and me to be right here.”

“Is that the only reason?” Once again he was sending her away. Hot tears rushed up but they didn’t fall. She’d closed her eyes against the fear of what he’d say.

“Apart from the fact that I can’t breathe and I can’t move?”

“That’s all right. I just want to know you’re near me when I sleep.” She trailed her fingers over his lips.

“And apart from the fact that I won’t make you any promises.”

He kissed her fingertips and she smiled sadly. “That’s all right, too. You know tonight is the night to farewell your loved ones?”

“She’ll go when she’s ready, I think.”

“I’ll wait.”

“Still? Even though you’ve seen how Luc dresses, and he’s the rich one. We’re not nobles, never will be. This floor is the best I can offer you.”

She had to wait, if there was any time for him to make up his mind. “I don’t care. I’d rather be on the floor waiting for you than in a palace without you.”

“Then that about covers it. They’re the reasons. You have to go back to the villa and wait. And you have to lock this door on the way out.”

Marella swallowed against the grip of fear. “No.” She shook her head urgently. “I can’t. What if you need to get out?”

“Then they’ll come and get me. I’m valuable merchandise.”

“You know about that?”

“I can guess.”

“Aren’t you angry? Aren’t you insulted that they would treat you like that? Just plan to sell you off?”

“People are bought and sold every day. For now it’s nothing but a good reason for them to keep me alive. There’s no point wasting energy on anger. There’s a big difference between what they intend to do and what will actually happen.”

Resting her head forward so their foreheads touched, she said, “I wish I could do that. See past the fear or anger.”

“Or lust.”

She smiled sadly, and said, “I don’t want to go,” but she pushed herself back to her knees and climbed stiffly to her feet.

As the door closed and the bar dropped on the outside, Marc swallowed as much wine as he could pour in one draught. When he’d caught his breath, he did the same again, until the skin was loose and nearly empty.

The mattress was hard, and his bruises felt like stones under his back. The roof was too far above to be more than seamless murk, but no amount of fatigue could force his eyes to leave the view. The future was just as hard to see, and what he could imagine was bleak.

Marella was matchless. She was the finest vintage wine and her touch was healing. But she had no idea of the world outside her *casa*. Only desperation made her dreams seem possible. They were only hopes and hopes could break your heart. But hope was all there was. Without it there was no point going on.

He moved his fingers up to touch the thread at his throat. It was gone.

Twisting slightly, wriggling to shift the lumps to a more comfortable position, he crossed his arms over his eyes and kept staring at his eyelids, trying to breathe through the crush of pain and counting breaths until he finally slept.

[top]

CHAPTER SIXTEEN.

Marella wiped a cooling cloth over her brother's brow.

The morning sun was bright in the sky and the journey to the neighbouring villa would have to be undertaken soon. Lavender and spearmint oil filled the air with soothing vapours, and she held forward a mug of wine.

"Are you feeling better?" he asked, reaching to slip a proprietary hand around her waist without opening his eyes.

"My bruises aren't so sharp this morning," she answered calmly, and his heavy lids shot wide, then squinted down against the light.

"What are you doing here? You should be with Leucetius." His eyes were pouched and as red as the wine he snatched from her hand.

"He was finished with me last night. I came in to tend you because Suelta is too ill to do it, and you have to go over to meet with Sarnicio." She stepped back. "Do you want to eat?"

"He's not finished with you. You'll be given to him when Sarnicio speaks today." He gulped the wine and instantly spat a spray that stained his arms and chin. "What's in that?"

"Artemisia. For your stomach." She held her face still, forcing expressionless calm over her features.

"Poison, more like. It's bitter. Throw it away and get me water."

"Of course it's bitter. It's Wormwood. It would have eased your stomach, but who am I to care? Do you want to eat?" she repeated.

"No. I want to get to this meeting. Not that Sarnicio'll be feeling any better than we are." He laughed as he recalled the night's celebrations, stretching to stand. Apparently, he had no reason to believe the night had been any more than a Bacchanalian feast.

"And you can leave the room," he continued in a sneer. "I don't want to lay eyes on you. If the *princep* wants to see you and your lover before he passes judgment, so be it. Until then, I can't stand to look at you."

Marella nodded and stepped away from her brother. Excess made him toad-like. Broad and heavily built, his olive skin was sun browned and his eyes were small and porcine. He looked and smelled sweaty. Even the sour stench of old alcohol couldn't disguise the malignance that leeched and beaded on his skin. "Until then," she said, and made her way from the room to help her sister-in-law prepare for the short journey.

Jura Torres looked no better, but when he brought stew to Marc, he sat against the wall eating from his own plate like they were comrades. "It's all right." He shrugged. "Considering there are no kitchen staff today."

Marc ignored the small talk, eating silently, watching Taran's commander from under his brows.

"You missed a great ceremony last night. The Horned God chose the Lady Marella to be his bride for the festival. You should have seen it. He had this giant silver cock. Just what she needs. Although, she wasn't so pleased." He looked up from his meal; a

laugh rumbled deep in his chest. “Still, he could hold down one squealing girl. I’m sure she did us all proud. Honoured the dead in their passing.”

The two studied each other silently for a few moments and Marc weighed comments. There were a few things he would have liked to say to the soldier, but he was determined to avoid a beating this morning. The set of Torres jaw looked too much like a challenge.

He would know he had a man missing. Whether or not he knew he was dead, Marc couldn’t guess, but Torres was fishing for clues to what Marc knew about the man’s disappearance. Let him fish. There was more he didn’t know about the events of the night and none of it was going to please him.

These were the men devoted to Taran’s protection. Marc let the corner of his mouth curl. Torres had no idea Marella was inside the villa, none, and Marc would have liked to be the one who broke the news. Marella was in there with his lord. It could as easily have been Luc. His second was lying in an alley in the city and he hadn’t put the pieces together.

Maybe Marella’s gods were awake after all.

The *equites* had fought at some time in the past, most were heavily scarred, and they were trained up to fine fitness. But no amount of training matched regular hard combat experience. They made mistakes. Too many mistakes.

“We’ve got no staff here,” Torres said. “Who thought to bring you that wine?”

Marc looked at the empty wineskin and up from his plate. “There are only soldiers here,” he said bluntly. “Who do you think brought it? Do you want to look at the new bruises your man left on my back? You’ll have to talk to him about marking the goods.”

Torres didn’t have his cane with him, or the broad blade he usually carried over his shoulder. Only the gold hilt of his dirk glinted from his calf strap, but it would suffice if they had any cause to argue. He laughed. “Yes. You upset him.”

“Why are you here?” Marc asked. “Even the lowest servants are free for the duration of the festival.”

“Well, there are two answers to that. First one, why I’m in this room, is to do with you. Once we’ve been across to a meeting this morning, you’ll have done your bit for us, here. We’ll be wanting to move you down the road a little way. I want you fit to ride.

“The second, why we’re not released for the festival, you wouldn’t understand. You’re a deserter. If you were one of ours, you’d be impaled on a spike. The truth is, if you were one of ours you’d have fallen on your own sword, but you Romans don’t know anything about honour.”

“No.” Marc smiled, but his eyes were cold. “I’ve been told that before.”

“We take an oath of devotion to our commander that’s more profound and more binding than any deed of slavery. A *devotio*. It’s more than just signing up for twenty-five years of duty. It’s a binding for life. We protect him against all threats, forever.”

“What if he’s not worth your blood?”

“He is. Taran is a hard man. A soldier. His father’s son. Most of the men with him were bound to his father but Taran swore us over to himself.”

“So he bought your lives for you, saved you from falling on your sword for his father?” And the generations before him as well, Marc guessed. The independence wars had ended with the siege of Numantia two hundred years ago. All the honour and all the war glory men like Taran carried came from ancestors they’d long ago forgotten. What happened to generations of men who needed glory when they had too much peace and stability? No wonder they hated Rome. The *Pax Romana* was driving them all insane.

Torres gave a sharp nod, confident of his moral superiority. He smiled just as coldly at Marc. “You fought for liars and thieves, an inbred cluster of fools. They command no respect and none of you ever have to consider questions of honour and devotion. Empire.” He laughed again and spat.

Marc raised his eyebrows and nodded. “Aye. But we fought. This province has been Roman and peaceful for two hundred years. When did you decide your master was so hard? Did he put down a village riot? Did some vagrants run amok in Caesaraugusta? Or did you stand beside him while he beat his wife to death?”

He ducked the flying plate and braced himself for the kicks he thought would come.

But Torres held back, spitting, "They tell me Marella will be at this hearing today. Not that you’ll get a chance to say goodbye. If you’re lucky you’ll get to see her new husband rub his hands all over her again. You’ll like that, I hope.”

Marc pushed the food around his plate for a few moments after the commander left, then finished his meal quietly. There was a worried man. He had a whole speech full of justifications ready to hear every time things got dicey.

Meanwhile, it was midmorning and he had no new bruises. Things were looking up.

Luc would find Cilo if he was in the city, but that wouldn’t answer any of the questions that mattered. Not even a tribune had the power to hold a prisoner that the *princep* wanted. And Cilo would only be here, now, if his term as tribune had ended. Chances were he was already decommissioned, and that gave him no real authority at all except the respect due from other Roman officers.

To the Celtiberian hierarchy, he was nothing but a Roman nobleman annoying them. Unless he had the sanction of the ranking officer here in Okilis. And for that, he needed formal charges.

It seemed Cilo wanted him held, not executed. This was too personal to be handed to the army. But there was no way to speculate. He could only wait and see how the they wanted to play this little game.

Getting Marella out of danger was the harder question. Yet again, he came back to the immovable truth. She couldn’t run. Whatever they did on her behalf, it had to be done here. She had to walk out of the *princep’s* prison free or she would die at their hands.

He felt the burn of helplessness flaring in his chest again. Even with Luc and his men beside him they weren’t likely to win any fight, but they were her only hope. Her only allies. Them, and an invalid noblewoman who thought it was better to die than to live dishonourably.

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Marella rode with Suelta. They had stained her lips and kohled her eyes and brows so death did not hold her quite so close, but she was weak, and every step the boys took jolted her more. She sipped her medication, and she carried a honey pot for sweetening warmed wine to ease her through their meeting.

When they reached the bottom of the hill and the envoy turned to climb the road up to Sarnicio’s villa, Taran dragged the curtain aside and snapped, “What’s going on up here?” His tone accused Marella. Something had happened that turned him from bitter disdain to outright loathing.

Craning past him to look up the road, Marella gagged on her breath.

Four of Sarnicio's men hung by their feet from a makeshift *potentia* near the villa's entrance gate. As they approached, the details of their deaths became clearer. Their hands were caught behind their backs, up to a noose as Marella's had been. She could not have identified them with certainty, although the cold dread in her stomach gave her clues. They had been disembowelled, and the gore from their gutting covered their upper bodies and hid their features.

Taran pulled his horse in tight circles as the view through the gate opened and his rage moved through livid silence to dark congestion. Eight Roman guards stood at attention, cordoning the entrance portico. Horses stood to the side, some were cavalry, some not. One showed the colours of the *Praefectus Castrorum* of Hispania Tarraconensis.

Marella looked on, horrified, then jumped back to claw at the rear curtains of the *carpentum*. The tribune was here, after all. All the threats from Marc's past had come together at Sarnicio's villa.

Taran's *equites* were forming around their leader. Behind them, Marc rode in silence.

Ahead, two of Sarnicio's guard and a centurion stepped forward to greet the envoy. A squad of Roman infantrymen stepped up to take horses as Taran's men prepared to dismount.

Inside the villa, a sense of strained quiet thickened the air.

Suelta gripped Marella's hand, closing her eyes as she fought for the strength to continue. She raised a ghostly hand to one of Taran's men. "Wine. Fetch me some warmed wine. Now. Bring it to the hall as soon as you have a jug prepared."

Taran's party was immediately ushered into the conference hall. Suelta and Marella were shown to stools and persuaded to sit. Taran stood near them in the centre of the open space, and behind him stood his eleven remaining *equites* and Marc.

Sarnicio sat on the raised dais in his conference chair, holding the apparent position of authority. On his right side and below him, Luc sat alone, his men in a tight line behind him. On his left sat the Roman prefect of Tarraconensis and a second officer wearing richly ornamented armour. But it was the man beside them that caught Marella's attention. She could not look away from him.

A mass of jet black curls fell down onto his shoulders. His broad back was covered by a black leather cuirass, with grape leaves and a spread eagle picked in gold.

He was stunning. His features were like those attributed to the gods in epic tales and legends. The perfect symmetry of his face held Marella enthralled. His skin was deeply tanned. When he smiled at the men beside him, his teeth were perfectly white ans even, his lips full, his nose long and straight. He laughed, and the sound carried like music through the open marble hall.

His arrogance was openly displayed along with his nobility. They hung in a loose drape from his shoulders: his white cape carried the wide, deep purple stripe of senatorial rank at its edge. Without words, it stated clearly that in the eyes of Rome he outranked everyone in the room, including the prefect and the *princep* himself.

Marella dragged her gaze from him, turning to find Marc.

Sarnicio barked her name and all parties turned up to hear his words. "The Druid said you were more trouble than you were worth, my dear," he spat. "I was foolish enough to disagree with him. I should have let your brother end you and your lover then."

The beautiful Roman found that amusing. He pointed a finger discreetly at Marc and winked, grinning.

Sarnicio closed his eyes. He had to defer to the Romans and the fact obviously irked him past endurance. Taran gripped his sword, grinding metal on the scabbard to denote his willingness to carry out that death sentence belatedly, and every swordsman on all sides, reacted in kind. The hall echoed with the grinding of threatened violence.

Again, the Roman laughed.

Marella felt the ice of dread creep up under her skin. She looked around the room, searching for an element of hope in the midst of so much finely balanced chaos.

The Roman prefect was an older man and a diplomat. He was neither amused nor annoyed by the petty antagonisms. He kept his gaze fixed respectfully on Sarnicio, waiting patiently for his deliberations.

Luc hid a smile behind his hand. His long legs crossed at the ankles. One arm draped over his chest, the other held his chin. They couldn't know the danger. No one, not even an insane man, would laugh at the sort of power wielded in this province by the men in the room.

She turned to Marc. He didn't smile. He shrugged and looked back up at the dais. His hands were bound in front of him but he stood easily, slouched on one hip, almost relaxed.

"Taran," Sarnicio decided he could continue. "Leucetius was found dead in the Temple this morning. You know that your sister was with him during the celebration, but not when he was found. I see she came home of her own accord." He turned his glare on her. "That is fortunate. The men I sent to guard her are escorting the Druid to the underworld, instead.

"Marella was to go to the priest. She no longer has that option since we suspect her of his murder."

Again the Roman noble cut him off. "He died of a broken neck. She must be stronger than she looks." He grinned up at Sarnicio, returning in measure the provincial patriarch's contempt.

"He had trouble holding one squealing girl, after all," Marc hissed sideways at Torres and grunted as he caught a sharp elbow in his ribs.

The *princep* resumed his summation in clipped syllables. "Now Taran, you and I could have seen this finished, but these gentlemen have an interest." He moved his hand almost dismissively toward the visiting contingents. "His family," he pointed to Luc, "are willing to offer a ransom for your prisoner's release into their hands. They will also purchase Marella on a slave bond if you agree.

"And we have here visiting Roman nobility who believe they have a prior claim on your prisoner. They have no interest in paying for him. They are demanding that he be handed back to them, and they will insist he be taken by force if we cannot come to a diplomatic agreement.

"The prefect here represents Rome and its interest in the political stability of our province. As you know, I hold these prisoners in my custody as is my right. But we have no civil authorities for the duration of the festival. We must rely on Rome if there is a risk of conflict, and Rome has made it clear they have no faith in our ability to keep the peace. They do not trust us to manage our own affairs any more than we accept the likelihood Rome will execute justice in line with our expectations.

"And so, we have only to decide, it seems, whether to let Rome have our prisoners to deal with in their own judicial system, and in doing so hand to Rome the demands of this young nobleman. Or to let his family take them at cost, and leave his family to deal with the Roman nobility. It becomes an issue then only of how much money we will accept as compensation for our injury."

The *equite* who had been sent for wine slipped quietly in behind his mistress, holding a tray forward for her. Marella turned the honey scoop in its pot and ladled a heavy dollop into the carafe, stirred, then poured a goblet for Suelta and handed it into her trembling grasp. Closing her eyes in mute thanks, she sipped the warm drink and sat stiffly on her stool.

Mustering her strength, Suelta stood, clutching Marella's hand for support. She managed to open her eyes long enough to address Sarnicio with respect, but her voice was weak. "If I might speak, my Lord. I have a way we might find a path through this."

Sarnicio clipped his reply, "What? Speak."

Suelta sipped her wine again. "I need a moment," she whispered. "Can the dogs be sent from the room while you consider my idea?" Clinging to Marella's hand, she turned her head to face the Romans, mustering as much pure hatred as she could throw into her expression.

Luc lifted one eyebrow and considered the woman for a moment. He turned to Marc, scowling as silent communications passed between them, then stood and prepared to leave the room. "I want to talk to the Romans privately, myself, sir," he said to Sarnicio. "We can take a moment outside the hall. Surely this woman doesn't need long."

The *princep* waved a hand irritably, dismissing them.

As soon as they had gone, Suelta squeezed Marella's hand, and pointed toward Marc. "Go over there. Stand with him."

Sarnicio and Taran glared cold murder at the girl as she moved to do as her sister-in-law ordered, and Marc turned a wary eye on Suelta. He couldn't read her purpose. With Luc and the Romans out of the hall, she had removed the only protection Marella had. But she'd moved her out of Taran's reach and the immediate danger her brother posed. It might be enough.

Clutching the last of her strength, she asked the *equite* to pour her more wine, then motioned for him to take the jug to the *princep*. She watched the progress of the jug, sipping like it was strength, as Taran and Sarnicio were handed goblets of the warm sweet wine.

When the tray returned to the stool beside her, she smiled, taking a deep breath and said, "Sir. We all want Marella dead. Her shame is too great for any soul to bear. Her shame has brought both our families into disrepute. As you know, she has accused not only the priest, but you, also, of having a long term affair with her."

Sarnicio gagged at having the slander brought so openly into debate and in front of his men at arms. He tipped back his wine and the *equite* rushed to refill it. If Suelta was moved at all by his fury, she hid it well.

Marella looked at Marc with dark eyes full of painful realizations. Nothing she had seen in the hall had given her cause to hope, and now Suelta's words were set to seal their fates. "I'm sorry," she whispered to him. She tried a small smile, but tears had flooded her eyes and they ran down her pale cheeks.

Suelta took her time. It was all she could do to hold herself upright, and her husband, reassured by her words, stepped forward to take her elbow. Glaring over her shoulder at Marella, he too gulped at the sweet wine and grinned coldly.

Marc returned his smile, the tense frown of his confusion lightening as he met Taran's contempt. Marella watched him, shaking her head and looking around at the humourless situation in the room.

"Taran stood to make a good profit on the peasant," Suelta continued faintly, letting her words wander over ideas, giving her listeners time to think about all she had to say. "If we take money from the family for him, what is it to us if the Romans then

take him back? If these nobles fail in their attempt to recapture him, again, what is that to us? We have the money we would have made on him at the slave stalls. His end is nothing to us."

She nodded again at the jug of warmed wine, motioning for Taran to refill hers, perhaps his own, while she waited to catch her breath again.

"So, to Marella. If Rome wants to ensure a peaceful resolution, they can surely have no objection to us holding our own execution, in their presence. We have only to prove to them that she killed the priest. We want to address our own honour. How could we consider accepting money for her freedom when an official public hearing of her case would demonstrate our blamelessness."

Marella watched Marc. He frowned again, but otherwise the words had no impact on him at all. Her sister was making deals with the *princep* to have her executed and it was of no consequence to him.

Torres stepped closer to his master. He was grinning. Marc looked over at him, then at Marella, shaking his head slightly in confusion. Suelta had not only moved Marella, she had moved all of the guests.

Suelta gripped her stomach, swooned, then straightened. She put her hand up to her own forehead, mumbling, barely audible. "That's all. That's what I wanted to say." Limping backwards, she struggled with Taran's help to find her stool. Caught by an urgent need, she said clearly, "Call the others back. Quickly."

Sarnicio looked at her as if she'd gone mad. "So your idea is only that we should sell the peasant to his family and to execute Marella here, in front of the Romans?"

She nodded, finding a dry smile.

"You've taken all this time to tell me nothing? I could have given this decision without your help. And we don't need any public hearing; this is nothing to do with Rome. Why would I give Marella the chance to spread her lies to a wider audience? Stupid woman." He finished the wine in his hand and waved to his men. "Call them back in."

When Luc and the Romans re-entered, Luc paused at the barest nod from Marc, and took up a position close to where he and Marella stood. As Marc watched the other men filing in, the realisation came that Suelta had removed everyone who might have joined a toast to their fates.

Marc leaned carefully toward Marella. "Stay behind us," he whispered.

Torres tried to step forward to force distance between them. "Shut up," he warned, but two of Luc's party now stood between him and his prisoner.

Sarnicio waved a hand to draw attention back to the dais, but he seemed disoriented. He wiped a shaky hand over his eyes.

Taran stepped forward sniffing at the cup he held, a look of horror spreading as the truth dawned painfully slowly. On the tray beside the wine carafe, Suelta's honey pot blurred in and out of focus. Roaring, Taran cracked an elbow back into his wife's face, sending her sprawling from her stool in a spray of spat blood. "Poison," he shrieked at his men. "She's given us poison."

Luc stepped forward next to Marc, slipping his broad blade over his shoulder and pushing the *equite* guard back another step. His men drew up around him, swords drawn.

The prefect swore obscenely, shouting orders as thirty of his men filed back into the centre of the hall.

Sarnicio screamed an urgent summons, bringing his guard to his side on the dais, armed. There was no clear enemy, but there were Romans. Their prisoners now stood across the hall, removed from their custody by the double line of Roman infantry and

the small group of Luc's veterans. The *princep* staggered, clawing his fingers into his own eyes as he called confused orders to attack, then doubled over to support himself on the conference chair.

Taran kept his feet, clutching at his chest as his face darkened in fury. In his raw, empty stomach, the sweet honeyed Belladonna wove its deadly curse. Pain washed shifting visions across his eyes and weakness flooded his muscles.

He waved furiously toward Marella, gurgling an order to kill. His eleven elite guards stood with drawn swords, but they had no way to move on his orders. Roman infantry held a line in the centre of the hall.

Marella coughed up sobs. She took one step toward Suelta, but a strong hand caught her and held her still. The woman was already dead. If she had more than a breath or two left, she was not herself aware of it.

Marc turned to slip the dagger from his brother's hip. He held it forward to Marella, holding his bound wrists up for her to free. "Now the fun really starts." He winked.

When the ropes fell free, he took the knife back from Marella and flipped it so he held the blade.

"Lay down your weapons," the prefect called clearly, making calming gestures at the armed men on all sides and their stricken leaders. "I have more to deal with here than the death of a Druid. This was supposed to be a simple prisoner handover. Don't make it a diplomatic incident that'll start the independence wars all over again. Lay down the weapons, all of you, and I'll call for the physicians."

While the prefect argued passionately, trying to reinstate calm, the Roman nobleman moved closer to Marc. His hand rested casually on the hilt of his sword. One of Luc's men took Marella's arm, dragging her, stumbling, back behind the cover of their bodies.

"Marcus," he said.

"Cilo," Marc responded.

Marella looked over Marc's shoulder at Cilo's face. His eyes were piercing green, like the inflectionless transparency of glass. And like glass, they were cold. If the eyes were the windows to the soul, this man had none.

Cilo turned to Luc and announced confidently, "Rome will take these prisoners now."

"Do you speak for all of Rome now?" Luc smiled darkly at him, shifting his fingers on the hilt of his sword. "Rome doesn't want the girl." He looked past Cilo to where the prefect stood with his ranks. "And it was never Rome that wanted Marc."

Taran blinked rapidly, wiping blistering sweat from his eyes. "They aren't your prisoners to take," he said. "Leave, and leave the two of them to answer for this."

On the dais, Sarnicio slipped into painful convulsions.

"Let me call for physicians," the prefect called again, urgently. "Get help for him, and for yourself, before it's too late." He faced Taran from less than an arm's reach and demanded that he see reason. "Your wife, a noblewoman of the Lusone family, has just poisoned the Arevaci warlord. Call for help, now, or you will plunge your people into civil war."

Taran spat, "Hand me back my sister and the peasant, then you can go to Hades and take your physician with you." He braced an arm across his middle and doubled over, groaning in rage or agony.

"Marella." Luc spoke to her and her knees nearly folded. "Go. Now. Get out of the hall. Take the litter back to the villa. Go."

She looked over at the men standing behind her brother. Wider implications were starting to sink in and shaking gripped her as she saw the acceptance of inevitable death fill their eyes.

The *Dux* di Lusone and Sarnicio di Arevaci, *princep* of all the provinces in the Iberus Valley, were dead men. Suelta's adolescent children would be in peril in Saragossa as the remaining family members fought for power. Numantia would be a bloodbath as soon as word of Sarnicio's death went back to the Celtiberian capital.

"Marella?" Luc snapped again and she nodded, too shocked to do anything else. She took a stumbling step and her movement broke the stalemate. As Luc's men parted to allow her through to the door, Taran screamed, "Marella! You cannot leave here. Stop her," and she fled to the door as the first clang of steel rang into her ears like a sharp iron stave.

A young Roman trooper opened the door and passed through it behind her. As she stumbled toward her *carpentum*, he threw himself into a saddle and spun his mount to full gallop down the hill to rally support.

Taran had no hope of leaving Sarnicio's villa alive, and when the noble families learned of Suelta's treachery, blood would be shed from one end of the province to another as swords were levied in the name of power. She struggled into the litter, stuttering instructions to the slave boys through sobbed breaths.

The flood of troubles was rising again, and Marc was inside the hall where the swords ate flesh.

[top]

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN.

Luc clasped Cilo's hand and turned his face away as the surgeon doused his forearm with *acetum* and began to stitch his wound. His grip whitened, and Marc winced for him, watching the needle pierce the skin along the line of the sword cut.

"Marcus," Cilo said, smiling coldly. "Now that unpleasantness is out of the way, we can go back to discussing our problem. As I see it, you should be nailed up by sunset."

Marc smiled back. "We see it differently then. I notice that these boys are all *Legio VII Gemina*. You aren't even travelling with an escort. You're decommissioned, fancy cape or not. You haven't ascended to the senate. You're bluffing." He took the wineskin offered and drank, passing it to Luc and wiping his mouth.

"Are you going to hand me to them?" He nodded toward the huddle where the prefect and his centurions stood. "Just for the moment, they're not interested. They're up to their ears in cultural instability, in the middle of a festival when the city is packed to capacity. And this is too personal for you to just walk away and leave them to it."

"You over estimate your own importance, Marc." Cilo slapped Luc on the shoulder and freed his hand, leaving the surgeon to bind the sealed wound. "I'd just like to know you're rotting."

Luc frowned at them, his face grey with pain. "You just lost all the backbone of your argument. In there you had thirty men behind you. Now it's just you and Cupid over there. You haven't laid any formal charges; if you had charged him with desertion he'd be dead on the ground by now. And you still have to go through me to get to him."

For as long as Marc had known Cilo, he'd been Luc's best friend. From when they enlisted at fifteen. And still at twenty, when Cilo had taken his purple stripe for the first

of two five year terms as Agricola’s *Tribune Laticlavius*, and Luc had been made commander of the auxiliary *Alae*. No one else who knew him would stand squarely in front of this man and issue such a challenge. Anyone else would be dead.

In the four years since Marcus or Lucius had seen their tribune, he’d gained nothing in social graces, and lost nothing of his dispassionate disregard of humanity in general. He seemed as cold and soulless as he had ever been. He smiled like an asp, and he could strike just as suddenly.

But something had changed. To anyone watching him, he had always been unreadable, cold, but able to turn a flood of charm on and off instantly. And four years ago, if he’d wanted Marc dead, he’d have been arrested the instant he showed his face. Charges would have been laid and the sentence carried out in Nertobriga. Or Cilo would simply have stabbed him where he stood. Something had changed, but it was hard to see what and why.

Marc looked over at the officer who’d stood beside Cilo in the hall. He was solidly built, pretty, with the same wide dark eyes as Marella. He came from money, even his fingers were neatly manicured. Equestrian, probably. Decommissioned alongside his lover, Marc guessed. Capable. Cilo didn’t tolerate fools in any capacity.

“Make up your mind. Now or never.” Marc stepped closer to the man he’d always considered one of Rome’s finest soldiers, meeting him eye to eye, and chest to chest. “I need to get back to Taran’s villa and I don’t want to have to look over my shoulder anymore.”

“Ultimatums aren’t in your best interest. If you really want to take a stand, draw a sword.” Cilo’s clear green eyes sparkled with the challenge. They might even have shown real amusement.

“I always preferred smaller blades.” Marc smiled, and pressed the dagger in his hand into the leather cincture at Cilo’s waist. Twitching the blade, he changed the angle of his thrust so its sharp tip reached up under the hard edge of the cuirass and touched the soft skin of his stomach. Leaning in close, Marc smiled and repeated, “I need to get back to the villa now, and I’m sick of looking over my shoulder. Tell them now to nail me up, or let it go.”

Cilo’s expression didn’t change, the sparkle in his eyes didn’t dim. “You won’t push that home, and you’ll never be finished looking over your shoulder.”

Luc pushed an arm between them and Cilo’s companion moved to join the tense circle.

“Marc.” Luc looked back over his shoulder. “Can you ride?”

Marc nodded. Adrenaline still covered the worst of his pain and left him feeling invincible. “Mount?” He shrugged. “Riding will be all right. Just give me a horse and a rail to climb.”

“Take mine.” Luc pointed to a bay, held near the portico steps.

“No. I know the horses I want.”

Cilo was still smiling. “This isn’t finished, Marc. It won’t ever be finished. When you are cold and dead I will still be haunting your nightmares.”

Moving past the Roman survivors and their injured, toward the confusion of horses and gear, Marc scanned the line of mounts. The horse he was looking for, Torres’ tall chestnut, was gone.

Running a careful eye over the line of horses, he considered the standard form of Taran’s bloodline. He turned back. “Luc, there are horses missing.” It would take a minute to work through how many, count off the *equites*, count off Sarnicio’s guard. How many were mounted? “Not many. One or two.”

Luc turned to the man beside him; “Do a body count. I want eleven of di Lusone’s men. You,” he turned up to Marc, “go back over there and find the girl.” He pointed across the valley toward Taran’s villa. “We’ll be there as soon as we get this cleaned up.”

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Marella huddled on the floor of her sleeping quarters, staring into the consequences of today’s confrontation. In taking the action she had, Suelta had shattered the peace of their world.

There was no way to know what powers were at play in Numantia.

How long had Suelta planned her actions? Could she have considered the safety of her children before she left Saragossa? Marella’s blood ran cold. Word of Taran’s death would be galloping toward their home already. If Suelta had not prepared his children for flight, or to fight for their right to inherit, they would be dead in their beds within days.

Taran and Suelta were certainly dead. Sarnicio too. And Leucetius.

Every threat to her had been extinguished in one brave and proud action. And yet, there was no sense of safety or relief while she sat silent and alone in the ostentatious villa. Marc was in the middle of clashing swords and egos.

And his blood was as precious to her as her own.

The room was cold. The citizens of the city and its visitors were still deep in celebration. Without servants to tend the hearths and lamps, the tenants of the villa were left to remember their own comforts. That morning Taran’s men had returned with burning brands to light the hearths for the New Year, but with winter’s chill still to come, her room had been left without a fire.

And this cold came up from deep inside.

“Marella?” The call shocked through her like the pure, white-hot light of a starburst, banishing the shivers in an instant. She was on her feet to run before her throat had cleared enough to answer. Her sandals skidded down steps and over the tiles as she ran for the atrium.

Marc held out a bracing hand to slow her and she slid to a halt, holding back the hands that wanted to reach for him. “You’re safe? Is everyone all right?” He looked uninjured. Sweat damped his hairline and the centre of his chest, but the blood splattered on him came from someone else.

“So far.” He was smiling, but his eyes were dark with emotion and a frown ticked between his brows. “Are you? Did Taran touch you this morning?”

“No.” She crossed her ankles where she stood, bending at the knees under the restlessness weighing inside. Her hands clenched beside her ribs and her frown begged. “Can I touch you?”

He laughed, holding out fingers so she could see the tremors running through him. “If you’re quick. The rush is fading fast. Everything’s going to hurt like a bitch any minute now.”

Marella stepped forward quickly, her own fingers trembling as she reached to take his face in her hands. Her heart reached towards him and her eyes searched his. “I want to ask what happened, but all that I really care about at this moment is that you’re safe.”

There were no words for the enormity of the crisis around her. Yesterday there had been cracks in her reality. Today her world and everything she knew had been blown to pieces.

Taking one small step brought her body against his, and she reached to kiss his lips lightly, then looked down at his chest and let her fingers trail onto his shoulders. “Is there anything I can get for you?” She looked at her feet and stepped back, deliberately forcing a space between them. “Medication? I would offer you hot water, but the truth is I don’t know where the kettles are or which fire to use. I’ve always asked a servant to fetch me water.”

She formed a small embarrassed smile and looked into his eyes and away. What she wanted was to wrap herself around him, to hold him and feel the solid reality of him pressed against her skin. More even than that, she wanted him to hold her, to want to hold her, but she hardly dared to hope.

“The others will be back soon.” Marc stepped forward, closing the gap again and carefully wrapped his arms around her. The warmth and softness of her was a balm against the hurts of the morning, and her perfume calmed him. “They’ll want food and beer and I’d guess they’ll find all the hot water they need. They’re soldiers. They’re used to doing for themselves.

“Your brother and his wife are both dead. So is Sarnicio and his guards. Luc and his boys are fine. So’s Cilo. And I brought back the horses. Just in what they left standing, there’s enough value for you to live well for a year.

“But there’s a horse missing.”

He felt her tense in his embrace, and she looked up with fear lighting the depths of her dark eyes. “Who?”

“The commander, Torres. When we realized his horse was gone we did a head count. His body wasn’t in the hall. He’d slipped out. And you know as well as I do, he didn’t run away.”

“He’ll come here, won’t he?” She sagged in his arms; the hands that had rested on his chest slid down to his hips as if she no longer had the strength to hold them up. “It will never end,” she said sadly. “Even when I know what has happened in Saragossa, and I’ve made arrangements for my dead, and my whole life is dust at my feet, still, their ghosts will keep coming.

“Is this what happens?” She looked up to search his face for reassurance. “When you break all the rules and challenge the natural order, is this what happens? The walls all fall down around your head?”

There was no accusation in her tone, but the stresses of the last months had left her without reserves.

“Sometimes,” he answered. “But I want you to listen to me. You’ll have nine men here, men who will protect you. Torres won’t have gone far. He won’t be hard to deal with; he may even be injured.

“If you take everything Taran has left here, keep what you can use and sell everything else, you will have enough to start a new life somewhere. If you want to.

“I need a few days to rest, but I’ll ask Luc to go back to the Gallego valley for my son. If you want to go back to your family in Caesaraugusta,” his voice went quiet so the implications weren’t overwhelming, “or back to the temple, you can go with him.”

Marella could hear the distance he put between himself and her decisions. He was deliberately freeing her from his judgment and himself from responsibility.

He pulled her closer against his chest and rested his face into her hair. “It will soon be over and you can make your own life. You can’t give up now. You’ve made it through the worst. All you need to do now is trust yourself.”

She let herself rest in the safety of his arms. There was a hole in his reassurances that shone like a flare, and the warmth of his skin couldn’t touch the ice that reformed inside. He’d made her no promises and his words settled in her heart like lead. She

slipped her arms around his waist and held him as tight as she dared, letting silent tears soak into the rough linen of his tunic.

“You’re going to go, aren’t you?” Please, her heart cried silently. Please don’t go away. The words wanted to burn their way out. Her knees wanted to drop her to the ground where she could beg, but even in the ruins of her life, with the pillars of her pride fallen into dust, a new sense of self-respect held her upright and silent.

“Aye. As soon as I can ride I’ll take a horse and go up to the coast. I want to go home.” He’d never changed his mind. If the things she’d seen and heard and done in the last days had changed her whole world, his intent had never changed. He was going home. He was leaving behind a life grown too heavy, and she had become part of the burden he wanted to shed. No promises, he’d said. No solutions, no tomorrows. Still, she had hoped.

No, her heart whined. The echo of her denials rocked through her brain, but none came to her lips. “Is it because of the tribune?” she asked.

“No.” Marc shook his head slowly. “I don’t know what he wants to do. He’s crazy. When he gets here I’ll try to find out what he’s thinking.”

“The Romans are coming here?” She stiffened and leaned back to look at him. “You don’t mean that. In one way or another he has cost you everything important to you and you want me to keep him under this roof?”

“I don’t know what he’s done. He hasn’t laid any formal charges. The warrant was only for me to be taken alive and held. Like I said, he’s mad. He’ll be all right while Luc’s here, I hope.” He wanted to smile, but his brow furrowed painfully.

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Luc squatted, reaching far in under the kitchen shelving and drew out another of the closed glass wine jugs they had found. Twisting the wax away from the seal, he uncorked it, sniffed and grinned as he handed it up to Marc. “Two more,” he confirmed, and dragged the last two jugs from their hiding place.

In the dining hall, Cilo had positioned an enormous laver on the central buffet, and was pouring red wine and bottles of citrus syrup into it. When the brothers appeared with their jugs, he stepped back to make way for their additions to the mix.

Marella sat in silence, as far from the blazing hearth as the room allowed, watching the men nervously. Marc met her eyes as he stoked the sangria to lethal levels of alcohol, and she managed a weak smile. She was afraid, and that fear darkened her eyes and whitened her face. She kept a silk *palla* pulled up over her hair despite the ridiculous warmth of the room, as if she could hide her insecurity along with her bruises.

Luc was oiling the wheels of détente in the time-honoured fashion, and soon the villa would be crawling with Roman officers and men. Even the knowledge that there would be women at the celebration did nothing to ease her fear at the thought of so many drunken soldiers.

Without service staff, they had turned the kitchen out, laying anything edible onto the buffets, and large chunks of meat charred in the too-high fire. Explosive wine punch and not much food. Her fears were not unfounded.

As the room filled around them, Luc dipped a goblet into the vat of sangria and sipped, asking, “Start at the beginning. Who is she and what are you doing here?”

Marc took a long gulp and drew a sharp breath back over the raw taste of the alcohol. He could tell the story from the beginning until now. But he couldn’t say yet

who Marella was, or how the story would end. She was either a noble priestess, a perpetual virgin dedicated to the Goddess Diana, or a frightened girl, alone and afraid.

He told what he knew of the story.

"A pregnant priestess. Again." Luc read the swirling vortex of his drink and tipped it back.

"Again." Marc nodded. "I'm beginning to suspect a divine plot."

Luc grinned and for a moment the hard lines of his forehead eased. "You'll be telling me you're caught in the tides of fate, next." When he looked up it was to study Marella. "It looks like all they could have in common. If you asked me to choose an exact opposite for Neria, that's the girl I would pick. Her colouring, her build, her attitude. Does she ever smile?"

"Aye, she does. Most of the time, when she's not scared. She hasn't got a lot to laugh about, tonight." He didn't want to look at her fear and he didn't need to turn to know where she was. Her presence hummed against him like the warmth of a fire or the breath of a whisper.

He was tired. He ached in every part not numbed by opiates and wine and he wanted to feel the healing softness of her in his arms. But there was more he needed to ask of his brother. "I can't go back up into the valley. Will you ride up to Caesaraugusta and bring Nico back?"

Luc's attention was still fixed on Marella with a singular intensity, as if he was reading her character. He stared from under clenched brows, his mouth a tight line of concentration. The barest nod marked his assent and he asked, "And Marella?"

"If she wants to go back to Ceasaraugustus, will you take her with you?"

"Does she have a death wish? She'd be going back to a *coup*." He paused to refill his goblet, then continued, "And if she doesn't go back?"

As if it answered the question, Marc said, "I want to go home."

Luc turned the incisive glare of his scrutiny on him and Marc watched a dozen questions come and go unasked. When he finally spoke, Luc asked, "Does she know that?"

"Aye, she knows."

"Is it time or distance you want?" There was no answer Marc could give, and Luc turned away from Marella to watch Cilo and his partner.

"Who is he?" Marc asked.

"Decimus Autronius. He's equestrian, born in Gallia Aquitania. They seem to be a good match. Cilo has someone to adore and Decimus has political aspirations. He can't get to the senate, but Cilo can."

"Cilo is crazy. If he wants a long career in politics, he'll need a wife and children. Is he going to buy one?" Strictly speaking, he had a wife. He was married to his stepsister, Luc's wife. "Are you worried about him going down to your villa while you're up here? Will Maia be safe?"

"I've given up arguing with her about him," Luc said. "He's her brother. She doesn't believe he'd ever harm her." He looked away, down at his feet like he was embarrassed. "I don't know who he is anymore. I don't understand what he is doing to you. It doesn't make sense."

"It will. I just have to work it out. There's method in his madness. There always is. I just can't see it yet." Watching Cilo, at ease and enjoying the effect of his charisma on the gathered legionaries, Marc felt the hairs rise on the back of his neck. He was a born leader. Stunning, clever, and mad as a cut snake.

He raised his glass to his lips and mumbled against it, as if he was reluctant to say the words aloud. “Every time I look at him, I think I should have killed him when I had the chance.”

Luc looked away, a furrow cut painfully across his brow. “Four years ago,” he agreed discretely.

Through the night, Marella watched Marc. She couldn’t see his face, but his shoulders hunched over pain and fatigue that burned into his bones. The brothers looked like twins, though she knew Marc was two years older.

The room was full of uniforms. Only the small group of Celts wore dark kilts, long and straight to far below the knee, with heavy folds caught at one side, and a wide leather belt low on their hips. A large group of women had arrived earlier, but they had vanished into other rooms almost as soon as they appeared. She didn’t miss the company of prostitutes.

Marella felt the cold stab of grief as she found herself wishing for Suelta’s hand. A sad smile trembled over her lips when she pictured her sister-in-law’s reaction to this dining hall full of Roman officers and troops. Her own was hard enough to bear.

Sitting alone, she considered the courage it would take to rise and walk the short distance to join Marc at the buffet, but fear made her knees weak and she laced her fingers tight behind the cover of her shawl. Although they made no eye contact, three of Luc’s men stood in a group, talking and laughing, a few steps to her right. To her left, one kilted guest lay on a couch, talking to a group of Roman soldiers.

Without direction, they had taken up positions around her. This night could never be less than a nightmare, but they had discretely made themselves available to her, and the consideration in that drew tears closer. Collecting her scraps of courage, she forced herself to stand and move toward the buffet.

Luc faced her and smiled as she approached. “I’m sorry this couldn’t be done differently,” he said. “But there isn’t anyone here that’s going to look at you for the murder of the priest. Actually, no one here will look at anyone too closely for the death of a Druid. Sacrilegious, I know.” He shrugged and looked around the room casually.

She couldn’t find the strength for polite smiles and small talk. “Thank you,” she said quietly. “I know you, and they,” she nodded slightly toward Cilo and Decimus, “did a lot to smooth over the mess, today. And I’ll have to deal with these officers in the next few days to have the remains of my family sent home.”

She waved a hand, generally trying to indicate a lot of things she wanted to say, but couldn’t. “Thank you,” she said again. A bolt of raucous laughter erupted beside her and she flinched sideways against Marc, then caught herself and straightened. “I have to go to my suite, now.” She looked up at him. “Will you walk with me up to the room?”

“Did you eat?” He took a platter and moved to choose bread and fruits and some of the charred goat, but she waved the offer of food away. To Luc he said, “I’m going too. I’ve got water heated and I’m going to eat. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

Marella caught a handful of her skirts in her hand and held her breath as she walked quickly through the crowd of men toward the *dormitorium* wings. The villa spread over the hilltop, with staggered corridors of rooms stepping down the slope, and she turned to the stairway leading up.

Marc followed stiffly until the sound of their feet on the stone stair was louder than the revelry. At the top she turned along a carpeted hallway and moved down to the doorway of the main suite. Marc continued past, stepping into the next room and setting the food tray down before returning to her door. “Are you sure you won’t eat something?”

"No." She shook her head, frowning. "I couldn't eat anything. I'm tired. And I ache all over. Same goes for you, I'd guess."

He didn't answer, but pain glittered darkly in his eyes and the shadows on his cheek seemed deeper carved. Under their roof, men laughed and drank. The city below celebrated *Samhain* without a pause. Across the Iberian Peninsula, through Gaul to Germania and over the sea in Britannia, the festival for the dark months continued. But the silence in the dark hallway seemed to fill the whole world.

The pressure of words he wasn't speaking seemed to weigh on Marc's shoulders and she ached to hold his face and cover his reticence with her kiss. There had to be a better solution than begging. She had some pride left and it was all that kept her upright.

It wasn't fear of looking foolish that held her back. It was her appreciation for the respect he'd always shown her. It was learning to hold onto that sense of worth when everything else was turning to dust. He'd been honest and warm and gentle and he'd given her hope. That she'd kept hoping for the impossible was her own responsibility.

Only when she turned to walk through her doorway, did he speak. "Luc is going back to Saragossa as soon as he can leave. You can go with him."

Once again he gave her permission to make her own choices without fear of anger and judgment. "This is a turn around," she said. "I'm the one who finds reasons for you to leave, remember. If you're going to do it right, this is where you offer me a reason to stay."

He smiled, but the darkness never left his eyes, and he held his hands out to show just how empty they were. "My choices are limited and they already cost me everything I loved once. I don't have anything to offer you. I don't even have the right to decide what your options should be, but if you want to go back, he'll take you."

Marella studied the tight lines around his eyes. This was the cost of turning your back on the gods and fate. There was no one else to blame, not even a vindictive Roman. He carried the cost of all his own choices. No wonder his life was so heavy.

Again she wrestled with the desire to plead. He had never asked her for anything. He'd stayed because it was what he believed was right, and that had been reason enough. But as she struggled to put her feelings into words, he turned away from her door.

"I need to soak," he said, and ambled painfully into his own suite.

Dropping the bar on the inside of her door, she leaned back against the dark wood and closed her eyes. All the words she needed were on her tongue, but they were words that should only be given as a gift. For Marc they could be no more than a burden. Fat tears pushed silently from under her lashes, and she raised a trembling hand to wipe them away. To the silence of the open room, to the ghosts of her family and to the ashes of the life she'd lived and all she believed, she said aloud, "I don't want to go back. I want to stay with you because I love you. And that is reason enough."

Her choice was made. He'd already given her more than she could ever repay. He'd put her needs first, he'd saved her life, but more than that, he'd given her a reason to live. He'd shown her a different kind of courage and strength and honour. Her choice was made and she had to learn now to carry the cost of that choice herself.

In so few days he'd given her, time and time again, everything she needed. He'd found ways to meet needs she didn't even know she had. And yet, still, she wanted to cry out and cling to him and say, "I need you. Don't leave me." But he'd already given her more than she could ever repay.

He needed to go home.

[top]

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN.

Marc laid his head back on the edge of the tub, studying the inside of his eyelids, breathing the fragrant steam and calculating times and distances in his head. On a fit horse, Luc would ride back to the Gallego valley in four days, eight or nine coming back with the lad. If Marella decided to go back with him, they would need to travel in a caravan. The time would double, easily.

He opened his eyes and looked down over the bruises on his chest and thighs.

If he was well enough to ride, he didn't want to wait that long. And seeing the boy again would give him one more reason to stay. He didn't need any more reasons.

First, he needed to get out of Hispania. He thought again about Cilo. He'd thrown a line of warrants out across the top of the country, like a net, without charges. Just a net to hold him still until Cilo could get to him. It worked. Not as it had been intended, but the end result was the same and that was all that really mattered. And then Cilo took no action against him.

It was a net, a taunt. A cat playing with a mouse.

He watched steam rising and looked up at the roof above. Everything in this room was fit for nobility, from the thick rugs on the flagging to the red and green drapes that hung from the rafters of the bed. It had been Taran's room, but Marella had given it to him.

He closed his eyes again so he could watch her move. Just lying still, he could watch her walk or turn or smile. Every tiny detail of her was clear in his mind, from the perfume she wore to the sweet taste of her kisses and the salt of her tears.

She couldn't ride and he couldn't afford to travel slowly.

But even if he could find a way to take her with him, it would be for what? He could take her to his father's house and she could learn to live in a thatched cottage. She could learn a new philosophy of life and remake herself from everything that made her who she was. And then she could wait while he balanced risks and responsibilities and chafed against the ties that bound him.

What he wanted was to talk to his father; to work and laugh and drink with men; to throw himself against an enemy; to risk everything; to fight and win. He'd been balled too tight around pain for too long. He needed to move and to scream.

That was no kind of life to offer her, and maybe it was no more than a way to manipulate her into making the choices he wanted for her. He couldn't gauge her devotion to her beliefs or to the vows she'd made. To him, the whole idea of returning to the temple was a ludicrous waste of a life. The fact that he didn't understand it didn't make it wrong. The choice wasn't his.

She was everything safe and warm and soft. He could see the dark depths of her eyes, the fullness of her breasts, the long rounded curves of her body. His hands twitched at the thought of sliding her hair between his fingers, of touching the smooth satin of her skin. Holding her wrapped him in sweet veils of citrus blossom, like a dream of Elysian Fields.

He could smell her perfume now.

The realization snapped him awake and he looked to the door that joined Suelta's suite to his.

In the soft glow of the fire she was a vision.

Her hair was loose, falling forward over one shoulder like dark cascades of honey. The pale *tunica* she wore was caught on a single clasp at each shoulder, leaving the smooth gold of her arms open to the warm light. She was wearing light makeup and a

smile. Her mouth wasn't the bright red of alkanet; it looked like she'd kissed ripe cherries and let their dark blood stain her lips.

"I wasn't sure if you'd want me to stay," she said softly. "So I'll just wait here until I know." Her eyes drank the light, as wide and dark as a night sky.

He smiled. "You're looking particularly lovely tonight."

"You don't look so good. Do you have some wine? Can I warm some, or get you some poppy extract?"

"I've had as much of the drug as I want. The warm water feels pretty good, and that bed is softer than anything I've ever seen before." He smiled. "I'll survive. But, what a peasant, where are my manners? Please, come in."

"I can come back, later. It looks like you were deep in thought."

"I was thinking about you actually, so it's a good thing you came when you did."

She walked slowly toward the tub, her bare feet silent on the deep rugs. As she dipped her fingers absently into the water at his side, she asked, "Are you wondering why I'm here?"

Her touch grazed his side and the bruised muscles flinched. He studied the soft depths of her eyes and his body firmed in response. "No." He smiled and lifted his shoulders. "It would seem fairly obvious to me."

"I mean my reasons. Why I'm here."

"No." He looked away, staring at the heavy louvered shutters that closed out the night. "You think too much." A frown argued that he'd thought just as much, but he continued, "You and Luc. You analyse everything to death. Relax and take what comes without questioning it all."

She nodded, smiled knowingly at him, and let her fingers draw a line of fire up his chest. Pressing just hard enough to taunt the bruises, she wiped droplets of water from his nipple, and again, then gently rolled the tender node under her touch. "That's exactly what I want to do."

Relief rushed up from the base of his spine, tickling awkwardly at overwrought nerves. He didn't need hard questions or deep rationalizations. He needed to hold her. Just to hold her and let the closeness of her in his arms soothe away the worst of his worries. He didn't want to have to think.

Her smile saddened and she gave the smallest shrug. "I really don't have anything else to lose." She touched his chin. "And you're so beautiful.

"I don't have a wide experience, but I never knew I could feel what I felt with you. When we made love it was like nothing I'd ever imagined. I've never been touched like that before." Her eyes fixed on his and laughter glittered in their deep softness. "Marc, you're blushing." She laughed and he caught the hand that slipped down to trace the raised lines of woad. "You are my fine wine," she said. "The finest. And as long as you're here, I want to drink right to the bottom of the cup."

He wanted to find a witty comeback, something to lighten the pressure that made it hard to breathe. But he didn't trust his voice, so he laughed to clear his throat. "So you're not here to make deals? No obligations or trade-offs?"

"None," she smiled.

"No trap to bend me to your will? No incentives?"

"No."

"No judgments?"

She took back her hand and walked to the bed to sit. "I can't help that. It doesn't seem right to me; I'm still not used to breaking the rules. But I'm trying. No judgments.

"I sat in my room, knowing you were right here, feeling you right here. And I realized that if I don't do this, after you go there won't be another soul alive who knows

or cares what I gave up. Only me. I'll be left to regret missing my chance for the rest of my life."

Marc wrapped a bath sheet around his hips as he stepped from the tub, feeling too exposed himself to stand naked in front of this soft vulnerability. "And me. I'd know."

"You do judge me." The hints of fear reappeared in her eyes. "You did before and you do now."

"No." He walked to sit beside her, lacing his fingers together to keep them from reaching impatiently to peel away her light dress. Every inch of his skin ached to press against her, to bury all the pain and losses of the past in her fragrant softness. "I'm not in any position to judge anyone."

"Are you going to ask me to leave?"

His mother's voice chided him, made him face her and look deep into the dark depths of her eyes. But his blood was hot. Need boiled under his skin, and months of emptiness, days of quiet longing, and her perfume on the air around him, all argued more passionately. Desire throbbed through him. He couldn't have made his mouth ask her to leave.

"No." His voice was husky, and heat near to tears burned behind his eyes. "I couldn't ask you to go if my life depended on it. Last night used up my quota of self-control when it comes to you." He could read the depths of the need in her offer, and his view of the future shimmered in the veils of a heatwave. All the reasons he couldn't stay began to blur and shift and tear into shreds.

Relief melted the tight restraint from her spine and she leaned urgently across him, pushing him back to lie into the softness of the bedding. If he'd looked at her, she knew, if he'd read her heart, he would have smiled and challenged the idea she had only come to him to make love.

But she had told him no lies, and it seemed he'd believed as much as she'd said. She'd come with no traps, or trade-offs or deals. And refusing to tell him she loved him was part of that honesty. Because she loved him, she wanted no more from him.

Turning carefully to kneel beside him, she bit her lip to stifle a pained grunt and he reached to run his hands down the length of her sides.

The soft fabric of her *tunica* ran under his hands and he cupped his hands around her hips, pulling her forward so her lips came down to meet his.

Marella opened her eyes to see desire darken his pale eyes, then closed them to let her whole body focus on his mouth.

Every pain and loss and misery she had known in the last six years, every mistake and every bad choice and every consequence she'd suffered, became nothing. She would pay the price again and again, if need be, if only the goddess brought her at the end into his arms. For one day or ten. She didn't want to think about the time.

His chest was a mottled landscape of contusions, light swellings where the skin split over bone and darker bruises, purples and greys. The sword wound over his lower ribs had torn and bled, but apart from the blackening of old blood deep in the scab, it looked least of his injuries.

She groaned and slipped a finger down the centre of his chest. "Are you sure you're all right?"

He ignored the question, turning his attention to the ties under her bust, loosening the *tunica* so its silky fabric brushed over her skin like a hot breath. She pushed back, wriggling to kneel further up the bed, and patted the pillows. "Move up here," she whispered. "Put your shoulders on the cushions, they're softer."

Marc laughed again. "Marella, I'm so doped up I can hardly feel my toes. If I didn't want you so bad right now, I'd be passed out." Despite his protests, he moved

slowly further up the bed. “Just come here where I can hold you, and don’t make any sharp movements.”

She smiled with him, but she winced every time he tried to move. Lifting her skirts, she moved to straddle his hips, leaning forward and taking her weight on her own hands. He twisted the clasps at her shoulders and freed her breasts to his touch, then slid the *tunica* down to gather at her hips, as her mouth demanded his.

“How bad do you want me?” She breathed against his cheek, sliding kisses from his ear, down his throat and back to find his mouth. She moved her pelvis in slow circles and reached behind to pull the towel away from his hips

“Look again.” He grinned. “This could kill me, and I’m not trying to escape.”

Sliding her hips back, Marella straightened her arms and slipped down his thighs. Licking and kissing a trail from his throat down onto his chest, she shuddered as her aching nipples dragged over his ribs. The tense resolve that kept tears from falling trembled in her elbows, and she closed her eyes, shutting out the glaring presence of his injuries.

More than anything, she wanted to stretch herself out against him, to press her skin onto his and merge their bodies into one. Never to be parted. The thought brought fresh tears up to burn behind her eyes and she flicked her hair to the side as his fingers moved through it. Her tongue teased his nipples and her teeth nipped gently at sensitive skin as she moved her mouth down onto his belly.

He grunted in pain and recoiled, and Marella froze, urgently seeking his eyes. “This is a bad idea. Look, I can just hold you. I could just go to sleep in your arms.”

He laughed or moaned, and she had to laugh with him as she blinked tears away. She was shaking with the compulsion of her own needs, her own desires, and terrified of hurting him again.

“Well I couldn’t just go to sleep, so trust me. If anything else hurts, I’ll chew off my own arm before I make a sound, okay.”

She stretched back up to kiss his mouth, and he lifted her easily over to lay beside him. Pushing onto his elbow with no more than a quick grimace, he smiled down at her and stroked a gentle finger down from her temple to her lips. “I’ll tell you what,” he said. “Don’t say another word. I’ll talk to you about it all in the morning. Aye?”

She nodded and laughed. “Aye.”

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The fire had burned lower and the chill of dawn pricked at their skin when Marella felt him startle in her arms. Opening her eyes, she looked down to where he lay at her breast, then followed his gaze to a blank patch of wall. “What?”

He didn’t answer, just turned his face up to hers. His gaze was focused past her and deep furrows crossed his brow. He was listening, and Marella strained her own ears to hear whatever had caught his attention.

A sharp hiss of pain drew over his teeth as he slipped to the side of the bed and forced himself to stand straight. Marella heard nothing, but he quickly tied the towel at his hips then slipped a bolt on the door between adjoining suites and checked the shutters were barred.

“Lock this,” he whispered, as he picked a single small knife from beside the bed and stepped through the door, disappearing into the hallway shadows.

Marc paused in the grey light of the unfamiliar villa.

It couldn’t be far along the hall. A body hitting a stone wall made a very particular sound, but it wasn’t a sound that carried. And the scraping of a scuffle had followed, but

too briefly. If there'd been trouble and one of Luc's boys had prevailed, a yell would have gone up by now. Silence meant the outcome wasn't good.

On one side was Marella's empty suite.

The next door past his was shut. Silently, he moved to listen against the dense wood. Mumbled conversation told him nothing. There was no way to know if the door was barred or bolted, and hitting it with his shoulder would just leave him rolled in a ball on the floor. Adrenaline loosened the stiffness in his joints as he carefully pressed fingers to the wood and felt it begin to swing open.

Cilo stood in the centre of the room, facing an intruder, cold and focused, rolling the hilt of his sword in his hand.

"I wondered when you'd show up." Marc let contempt crawl out with the words as he eyed Jura Torres. "Wrong room."

Taran's commander held his gilt dagger under Decimus' ribs. The young Roman officer stood with is arms loose, his hands forward and open to show he had no intention of resisting. A graze bled down from his temple.

Torres spat. "The whore moved. Into the main suite? I should have guessed she wouldn't let the bodies get cold before she was settling into their beds."

"You can't hope to leave here." Marc spoke as much to keep the situation moving as to share any insight.

"I don't hope to leave here. I do intend to take you, or a Roman, or Marella with me." He paused to spit again. "This one will do for a start."

"And miss your only chance at me?" Marc asked. "After all, you could have had your pick of Romans. The villa is full of them. Why'd you want to wait so long to join the party?"

The *equite's* hair stuck to a forehead damp with sweat. He was pale and shivering, spitting out the nausea of pain. Marc passed a slight nod to Cilo and flipped the small dagger in his hand. The tribune took a slow step one way and Marc stepped the other, increasing the distance between them, dividing the commander's strained attention.

"Filth." He stifled a cough and colour drained from his lips as his eyes darted back and forth between the two men.

Marc took a small step forward. "If you cut him, I'll have you before you can pull your knife clear. Drop him now and try me. Just you and me." He flipped the knife again, flaring his fingers around the hilt. "Come on, commander. Last chance. One on one."

Marc knew now why Torres had taken so long to try for revenge and why he had trouble concentrating, why he'd already made too many mistakes. He read the grey sweats of blood loss and the wounded contraction of his posture.

Meeting Decimus' eyes, Marc raised his eyebrows in warning, flipped the knife again and said, "Gut wound."

Decimus spun back away from the knife, bending his knees and jabbing as he did with a sharp elbow.

An instant of bloodless pain froze on Torres' face as the knife left Marc's fingers and lodged in the open front of his tunic. In that same instant, Cilo stepped forward, sword raised, but his action stopped as suddenly as it had begun. The intruder was fatally injured, there was no need to soil his own blade.

As Torres dropped to his knees, his glare fixed on Marc, Cilo changed the direction of his thrust and flashed the ornate etching of his waisted *gladius* back, jabbing its tip against the dark abrasions on Marc's belly. "Gotcha." He grinned.

Decimus stepped forward, wiping a thin trace of blood from his own belly. "Cut it out, Cilo. It's too early for this kind of crap."

Marc watched the cold green eyes. There was no shake of adrenalin in Cilo's hand, nothing to suggest he'd reacted at all to the *equite's* attack. If he still shared the same world at all, his grip on reality was slipping.

Decimus moved between them, pushing Cilo's razor sharp blade down with his bare fingers as if it were nothing but a child's wooden toy. "Come on. Let's eat. I have to go in to the barracks and make these reports, and I want you with me when I go."

Marc reconsidered his assumptions. Cilo had never been subordinate to anyone Marc had ever known, except Agricola himself. This angelic young officer was not only still in service to Rome, he told Cilo what to do and he did it. How the mighty had fallen.

Cilo turned away and Decimus clasped Marc's hand and forearm. "Thank you." He wiped again at the smear of blood, catching the trail on his fingertips before it touched the pure bleached white of his loincloth. Speaking as if Cilo was no longer in the room, he focused his attention on Marc and said, "You aren't staying around here long, are you? He really did post warrants for you all over the north of the country and he doesn't care if they're serviced or not."

Ignoring Cilo himself, Marc stated bluntly, "Without charges. He's just sent out orders to hold me."

"Some of them." Decimus' face showed compassion, but not apology. "Some are just orders to hold you. Indefinitely. Until he comes to where you are held. But he has left charges at random. Some of them charge you with insubordination, some with desertion.

"I can't give you any reprieve, but I can draw up a letter of safe conduct in your brother's name. It'll be enough to get you out of Hispania Tarraconensis."

"He's got nowhere to go, have you Marcus?" Cilo laughed to himself as he finished dressing. He slipped up beside Decimus and put an arm over his shoulder. "Don't listen to my friend here, Marc. Until a month ago I outranked him, so he doesn't really know what I've done. I haven't left charges at random, there's a pattern in it. I've given you a chance to figure it out.

"And I'm sure you're smart enough to know that going outside Hispania doesn't guarantee your safety. Even if you can pick the pattern and work out where I might have filed charges and where you'd be safe, you only need one transfer, one centurion who knows there's a charge against you and recognizes you and you can look forward to the scourge. Or a stake. No soldiers like deserters, do they?"

"Why? Why go to so much trouble? Why would you bother making such a complex mess just to trap me and still let me walk out this door here tonight?"

"You should be dead. You pulled a knife on your commanding officer. Any officer, any military court in the empire, would execute you without hesitation." There was no trace of emotion anywhere in Cilo's face. He didn't even have the humanity to gloat.

"Because of you, Luc took everything I needed away from me. He left and he took my sister with him, and he had no right to do that. You should have kept out of it. That's a lesson you can think on now as long as you live. As long as you can keep running one step ahead of Rome."

"If you really wanted me dead, I'd be dead by now." Marc swallowed as the enormity of the threat he faced became clearer.

"Exactly. If I'd wanted you dead, or Luc dead, you'd both be dead by now. I want you to suffer. I want you to wake up every morning afraid, and I want you to close your eyes every night knowing that it might be the last time you will ever sleep. I want you to lose everything that is important to you, for the rest of your life.

“Luc still has Maia. Are they happy?” He turned his head down, and studied his fingers. “He took what wasn’t his, and you helped him do it. But all debts come due, eventually. Don’t they.” He smiled a brief, cold smile.

“The warrants will expire. I will get bored with posting them. But you won’t know when. Give him a letter of safe conduct, Dec. Let him feel his way through the traps I left for him in Britannia.”

Marc had no more to say, and no ersatz courage with which to say it. Even his breath was shaky. Just like Marella, he had no safe home to return to. But while she could flee to another province and begin another life, his choices had, in the end, left him with nowhere safe. Ever.

When Marella slipped the bar from the door, he stepped in and lifted her up to his mouth. Without speaking, he strode to the bed. Laying her under him, he stretched with his legs twined in hers, keeping as much of her skin pressed against him as possible.

Swallowing the burning knot that rose again in his throat, he slipped himself lower. As he drew the dusky swelling of her nipple into his mouth, low moans reverberated against his cheek. The skin of her breast was translucent. Faint blue lines described her pregnancy and he closed his eyes as she wove her fingers through his hair and held his face against her.

If she had questions, she had insight enough to stay silent.

An old, fierce pain screamed up under his diaphragm. The bones and bare nerves of his essential self were on fire and he tried to wrap the burning in soft feminine comfort. The answer to a fundamental need was written deep in her pale flesh, and he searched her body, touching, seeking over every inch of her skin. But even when she moaned and shuddered under his touch, even when he burst deep inside her, groaning into her shoulder with the intensity of his release, there was still no end to the burn.

His head was light and he was nauseous with the absolute reality of physical pain pounding through him. His ribs felt broken, and every choked breath seemed to grind bone on bone, stabbing into his lungs and forbidding the air he so desperately needed. Bruised muscle hurt like she had beaten him anew with studded clubs and canes, but there was nothing he could do or say except to bury his eyes against her throat and hold her tight.

Marella lay awake as silent tears filled her eyes and flooded back to the pillow behind her. One hand tangled in his hair, holding his silence onto her shoulder. The other stroked his broad back, as a mother would comfort a small child.

She lifted her leg, sliding the ball of her foot down his thigh and calf, gently soothing. He was shaking.

“Marc.” The word was whispered but she felt him tense in her arms. She needed to ask what had happened, but now was not the time. “You need opium.”

“Soon.” It was little more than a grunt dragged over blood and gravel, but he lifted his head, shifting his weight to the side so she could see his face.

She could feel the catch and clench in every breath and his pupils had drawn to fine points with the pain. “I’ll go now and get it for you.”

The bottle was on a table just out of her reach, but he tightened his hold, pulling her in closer to him and said, “Yes. Soon.”

Marella wiped her eye and tried to force the fears from her system. Whatever had happened, for now, he needed to hold her. Moving to the side had taken pressure off his chest and his breathing was easing. He’d closed his eyes and a hard frown cut into his brow like a scar. Speaking softly, she stroked her fingertips along his jaw and said, “Last night you said we could talk in the morning. Can I tell you what I’ve decided to do?”

"Yes," he breathed, like a man waiting to hear the hangman's verdict.

"I'm going to sell off what I have here, as much as I can, and go with your brother when he comes back. Down to Toletum. It's as good a place as any to try to start a new life."

He didn't open his eyes, and the frown stayed firm. "When did you decide that?"

"In Nertobriga, after you walked out." The fears she had been fighting settled back into her stomach. She had hoped he would be relieved to know she wasn't going to go back to the temple or back to the power struggle in Saragossa.

"How do you know you can do that? Do you want to raise a child alone? Do you want to learn to live without money and servants and position?"

The fear grew into trembling, but she had to let him know she did not intend to try to bind him. "I don't know. Yet. But it's what I need to do and I'll find a way to do it."

"Is it what you want to do, or is it what you think I want you to do?"

"I don't understand this. Why does it feel like you're attacking me? You don't even raise your voice and I feel like you're yelling."

"I'm not. I'm telling you to make your own choices. I'm not capable of making the right decisions for you. You have to face raising a child that might look like the man you hate. You have to face the bigotry of people around you when you don't have a husband beside you. You have to learn to cook and clean and raise children, when you could be rid of the last piece of Leucetius and go back to your vows and the temple and everything you know."

Hearing that name made her stomach flip over and an involuntary whimper slipped between her lips. "It is my choice. Not yours. I'm not holding you responsible. You can go home and do what you have to do." The trembling had moved up into her chest and it made her words shaky as she made herself finish what she'd wanted to say. "I want to stay with you, just until Luc comes back. Or until you leave. I'm not asking any more of you than that."

Slowly, he lifted himself up onto his elbows, staring down at her with eyes that cut through any artifice to lay her soul bare. When he looked at her like that, he looked straight past any words she could offer. "You don't want me to stay with you."

It was neither a question nor a statement of fact, and there was no way to respond. She could not lie to him, and if she told the truth, she would make a lie of everything she'd just said. She would make a lie of all the promises she'd made to herself.

She lay in silence, staring back into his icy glare until something broke in his eyes, and they darkened suddenly. He smiled, but there was no light in it and he nodded. Rolling away from her, he forced himself to stand, and straightened slowly. Keeping his back towards her, he dressed quickly and walked to the table to swallow a dram of the opiate. "Torres is dead," he said, and walked from the room.

[top]

CHAPTER NINETEEN.

Alone at the small farmhouse they had hired at the close of *Samhain,* Marella sat on the top rail of the stockyards and watched Marc ride. As a little girl she had watched her older brother train with the other young equestrian elites. Then, little more than a toddler, she had loved the great heaving animals, but no young noble woman wanted to ride. Horses were part of the outside world inhabited by men.

Far at the back of her mind, the realization that he was well enough to leave whined inaudibly. Whenever the possibility rose enough to make itself known, she straightened her spine and shoved it down again. Even if her eyes burned.

The last ten days had been the best and the worst in her life. Her heart made notes, a deeply private diary of memories she could open any time she closed her eyes, and she refused to add any images of heartbreak.

Luc would take Taran's horses in exchange for a house in the village that serviced his villa and extra in silver. The mad Roman had ridden south to Toletum, to Luc's home to see his sister, while Luc and one of his men had ridden north to collect Marc's son from the farm on the Gallego. They would return any day now. Any day.

He still favoured one side, she could see the way discomfort pulled one shoulder down, and he kept his left arm braced across his stomach most of the time. But his movement was freer, his brow less furrowed.

When he cantered back toward where she waited, her mouth curled into a smile without thought. Seeing him still made her smile. She didn't need to cry.

Every morning when she woke up beside him, wonder bubbled in her heart and stopped the breath in her chest. Every time they made love, she was transported. Her spirit could dive under his skin and hold itself against his heart. And sometimes when he slept he held her so tight it seemed he needed her there, like a salve against a wound. Sometimes it seemed he needed her more than he wanted to admit.

"You look more relaxed," she said, holding out her hand.

He leaned from the saddle and held a steadying hand as she stepped down from the rail. "It's better," he mumbled half to himself. "I still don't know whether I like her or the chestnut." He found himself drawn to the grey mare he rode, even when his rational mind told him the chestnut stallion was the better choice. His lines were magnificent; he could make good money anywhere they went by hiring him out as a sire.

"Take her," Marella said. "Luc can put him over ten mares and build up the line. If you leave her he'll only get one foal every second year."

Marc looked at her. "Why are you thinking about what's best for him?"

She smiled and turned back toward the house. "I'm not. I think she'll want to come home and I don't think he'll care. But I'm not going to say that aloud, am I? Take both. They're not mine anymore, anyway."

None of the things she could say aloud really answered the needs in her heart. If she'd spoken the truth, it would have been to weep at his feet and try to hold him there forever. "Decide. Luc will be here tomorrow or the next day."

She froze, searching out the wisp of movement she'd seen in the tree line. Taking two small sidesteps, with reason trying hard to calm the innate fear, she raised her arm and pointed into the woods. "Ask her," she said and moved quickly into the safety of the house.

Marc watched the trees.

The wolf, it seemed, knew the farm. She hovered around the edges of the cleared land every late-afternoon, watching her new tenants. She had been growing more agitated as the days went on, and through the last two nights, she had called for him.

Marella had claimed more than once to be able to feel her near, even when no one could see her. Marc dismissed the claim as superstitious guff, but there was no denying the way his blood rose when her clear golden howls lit up the nights. She was anxious for him, calling for him to follow.

When he walked into the kitchen, Marella wiped irritably at her eyes and turned to throw faggots at the hearth fire. Sparks sprayed up and spattered over the tiles, and she

ground them under her sandal like they were tiny hopes. “So? One? Both? What did you decide?”

“I didn’t decide.”

Her hands gripped her *tunica*, crumpling the soft linen on her thighs into knots. “Tell me again,” she said to the flames. “What are you going to do?”

Marc watched her panic, snatching her skirts away from the fire when she stepped closer to drop the kettle on its chain. Boiling water was her most notable domestic skill and she sometimes struggled to get it right.

She’d asked before. The answer wasn’t going to change. “I’ll go back to Britannia; I want to see my father. He has a way of looking at life that helps make sense of things.”

“But you aren’t going to go up to Caledonia, are you? Not to where they’re still fighting. And not to the front in Germania?”

“I’m not planning to, no.”

“That’s not an answer.” She moved stiffly to stand behind him and leaned down onto his shoulders. “You’ll go where ever there’s work, won’t you?”

“Aye.” He reached around to pull her onto his lap and rested his face against her, breathing the scent from her skin.

“I don’t know how soldiers’ wives stand it.”

“They don’t have wives. The army doesn’t allow it.”

“That’s right. What does Rome think they’re doing for twenty-five years?”

“Going whoring.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her cheek against his. “I believe it. Is that what you did while you were enlisted?” she asked.

He laughed and stood up, lifting her with him. “Yes. And I had four brothers with me. And Luc still has those same girls living all over his estates.”

“No he doesn’t, does he?” She plumped pillows and pulled them in behind her shoulders where he’d laid her down on the bed.

“He does. You’ll have to get over your prejudices. They’ll be your neighbours.”

Marella nodded, feeling carefully for what she could say. It was a subject where she could easily say the wrong thing without intending to. “And Luc makes his money from brothels?”

Marc rolled onto his back beside her. “No. He just plays at being master of the estate. Cilo and his sister, Luc’s wife, have more money than the gods. And the woman who left the estates to Luc was *the* madam of the whole empire. I don’t think he cares what they do as long as they leave him in peace.”

She groaned, pressing butterflies out of her stomach. “Doesn’t everyone know who they are? Don’t people talk?”

“Probably. But since the estates are very nearly self-sufficient, there are farmers and physicians and merchants all living in the villages too. How does it matter what people outside say?”

She couldn’t speak. The reality of the choices she’d made still hit her hard at times, and when he left she would have no one to tell her, calmly, that none of her fears had substance. When he was gone, all her fears would be real.

Already her fears crowded up under her skin. Her cheeks and eyes burned and her lips longed to say, ‘stay with me; please don’t go.’ But she rubbed a hand down over her mouth and pulled the words away. Where his arm rested across her abdomen, tickling bubbles of movement silently reminded her of her own child. The little one could hear his voice, knew he was near, knew they were safe. “Tell me again,” she whispered. “Where are you going to go?”

***

Marc wiped the predawn chill from his arms and stamped his feet. Winter would come in hard this year; he was glad Marella was going south.

The grey stamped her feet too, irritated by the early attention. “Get used to it, my darling,” he cooed into her ear and she turned her bright, intelligent eye on him. The look she gave was so close to scornful disdain that he had to laugh.

Everything was ready; he’d prepared the afternoon before. Water was drawn, enough firewood was cut for a week, there was meat and eggs and cheese and corn meal in the larder.

Saddling the horse took no more than a minute, and it suddenly seemed too soon to be leaving. Surely there were things left undone, things that should have been said. He had a change of clothes, a cloak, some food and the wineskin. And an opium decoction. He’d need that by tonight. Most of the money he had, he’d left for Marella; he could work for what he needed.

He ignored the whines and anxious high-pitched yips of the wolf as she trooped the barricades. Keeping the trees always between them, she dashed the length of the clearing and back.

Resisting the urge to look around the house yard once more, he turned the mare’s face to the north and cantered along the tree line toward the road.

***

Marella startled, waking with a frown and glaring irritably around the room. The sun wasn’t even up yet. Dropping her face down into her pillow, between her elbows, she laced her fingers behind her head and closed her eyes. She’d just rest her eyes a moment. Just a single moment of quiet.

There was lead in her eyelids and fog and soft wool filled her head. Somewhere between sleep and waking, she assured herself she was getting up. It was warm. The flagstones weren’t cold because rugs softened the floor and braziers warmed the air.

Servants were going to come with warmed wine and bread and honey. She wasn’t hungry though, she was tired. And what she wanted most was for them to go away and take the food with them and to stop tapping on the table.

She had not realized she’d dozed until she startled awake again. “Yes,” she said to the dark. “I’m coming.”

Now the air was cold and she pushed her covers back reluctantly, dragging an old rug around her shoulders as she put her feet to the cold floor. Her hair had tangled and wisps dragged into her mouth when she yawned. Using her fingers as combs, she shoved it back over her head and patted the knots flatter.

A lamp was left barely lit in the main room and she slipped the tiny gate valve open a fraction to bring up the light. Stumbling into the side room, she peered down into the cradle. The babies slept like cherubs, neither had stirred.

Lifting the lamp to light further down the room, she glanced over each of the small cots. Both children slept soundly, tucked under their covers.

Marella groaned. Her bare feet slapped the floor as she headed back to her bed. Dogs. Or drunks. Who knew?

She plopped back onto her mattress and flicked the old cover out flat over the bed. Too many wash days had taken his smell from it, but she held it like a comforter. It was soft and warm and she felt safer when she slept under it.

Just as she lifted her feet and raised the covers to slide back under their warmth, there was another knock.

Someone had changed their plans.

She dropped the covers, pulled her rug back around her shoulders, and forced her feet to the floor again. “Yes. Yes, I’m coming,” she mumbled. Again she tried to smooth her hair, but she wasn’t expecting company. At this time of night, or morning, it would be one of the girls with an emergency and they didn’t care how she looked. They knew how she felt.

She padded through to the entryway and held her fingers on the bolt, ready to unlock the door. “Yes?” she yawned.

“Marella?”

Hot weight hit her stomach and her knees folded. She caught the doorjamb, swallowing hard, wiping a shaking hand over her mouth.

To open the bolt she would have to release the wall that held her up, or move her other hand and risk freeing sobs from her mouth. She held onto the wall and slowly drew the bolt so the door could be pulled in.

When she stepped back, she blocked what light there was spilling through from the main room, so he looked like little more than a piece of night that had taken form. But she could smell him on the air and the scent stopped her breath. Her heartbeat caught at the base of her throat and kicked in her stomach.

“Did I come at a bad time?” he asked, and a sob sprang from her mouth.

Her hands pressed hard against her thighs, while her fingers caught in soft flannel and dragged her hem up off the floor.

She stepped back again. “No.” The word was only moving air, but he followed her into the room.

Words had deserted her and she pressed her hand back over her mouth as her eyes filled with tears. His hair was short. His tan had faded. His eyes were dark in the low light. He didn’t smile.

She shook her head and tried to force her throat to work, blinking to clear her eyes, but she still couldn’t find any words. Finally she forced out, “I can’t speak.”

He smiled and her chest filled with pain so sharp she thought her heart had burst or broken. Holding a hand forward, palm down to show her, he said softly, “Maybe I should come back when the sun’s up.”

Marella stared at his fingers. They were trembling and he clenched them into a fist and pulled it back.

“No,” she said again. “How long have you been back?”

“A couple of hours. I went to Luc’s. I left my gear there. I was going to wait until morning.”

“But you didn’t.”

“No.” He hung his thumbs on the belt at his hip and slouched onto one leg. A deep frown cut his forehead. “I needed to see you. Can I come in, or will I go?”

The question stung her to action. “Come in. Through here.” She rushed ahead of him into the main room of the house. Stooping, she raced around to collect scattered toys into a basket. “I’ll get you wine. Have you eaten?” She stopped and turned to face him. “By the gods, Marc. Why are you here?”

“Luc said my lad was here.”

Marella stared. “Yes. Yes he is. Did you want to see him, now?”

“Aye. I won’t wake him.”

The lamp threw bare light down the long thin room, lighting the children again where they slept. Marc knelt to kiss the brow of the sleeping child, pulled the covers tighter around his neck and stepped quietly back from the bed.

Through the doorway where Marella waited, he held up two fingers and pointed to the cradle. “Yours?”

She shrugged. Shock had slipped away, leaving hope and dread to war in her stomach like a cold, writhing mass of eels. “Sort of.”

He leaned back onto the wall, his hands crossed behind his hips, and Marella bit softly on her bottom lip. It was what he did when he wanted to keep his hands still. Or out of trouble.

“Come and tell me what has happened in the year since I saw you last.” She hadn’t intended any sting in her words, but sadness sparked in his eyes and he looked away for a moment before he answered.

Last time he had seen her, she was sleeping peacefully, her hair spread in silky swirls over her pillow. “I did what I said I’d do. I worked some private security for a while. I spent some time with my father and some time in Hibernia, finding out what life is like outside of the empire.”

“And are you back here for the off season?”

“No. I decided to come back. To stay. I had to come back.” He paused, searching the room for something important, but found nothing. His gaze came back to her face, then slipped self-consciously down to her feet. "No one will be looking for me down here now, I hope.”

When she moved, he followed slowly to the main room and sat on a stool by the table, resting on his elbows, lacing his fingers. “Your turn.”

Hers was a story easy enough to tell. Not as brief as his, but not complicated. She didn't want to speak of the hardship. The life she had chosen had worn away at her just as surely as if it had been a whetstone on soft flesh. But it had been her choice, and she had survived, and thrived, and even come to be happy. “When I got here, I didn’t know what I could do to live when the money ran out, but this house had belonged to a family.” She nodded her head toward the room where the children slept. “And that room had all those beds.

“Like you said, there are a lot of girls here with little ones and no man to provide for them. So I started caring for the babies while their mothers work or travel. The other little boy out there is only here for two days. And Nico stays here whenever his friends are staying.” She smiled. “He’s a good boy. You’re right to be proud of him.

“It’s worked well for me. I love the children and it made it easy when Mireia was born.”

"Mireia," he mouthed the name, then nodded back toward the nursery. “And the other little one?”

“One of my mothers died from fever and I just kind of inherited her baby girl.” She shrugged again. “It's life. This life. Things come; things go. And I try to remember it's only change. Things change and I can survive the changes.”

Marc watched the way her eyes caught the bare lamp light, or darkened with shadows. Her hair was wild and soft, curling in ringlets like a dark halo. He studied her mouth as she spoke, watching her lips form each word. She sat opposite, with a threadbare rug around her shoulders and her nightdress pulled into a wad on her lap. “You look beautiful,” he said, and she turned her face like she’d been slapped.

“I look a mess.” Her fingers flew to her hair and she stood quickly and moved to bring a flask of wine and wooden mugs from a nearby shelf. “I don’t get much sleep.”

She was nervous, agitated, he could read it clearly in every movement. Tiny tics played in the soft skin near her mouth. She fixed her eyes on him as she handed over a mug. “Did your father have the wisdom you needed?”

He took the wine and nodded, smiling sadly. “Aye. The first day I got there he told me everything I needed to know, but it took me a year to realize he was right.” A year of waiting; waiting out the uncertainty of the mad Roman's plots. And of moving, but slowly, like a trek through quicksand; each day fearful that he had waited too long; each day cutting the distance down by slivers and degrees that took an eternity to bring him back to this place.

“What did he say you should do?”

“He said I should do what was important. He said I should hold onto the things I need and let go of the things I don’t.” He had let go. There was never an end of battles to fight and blood to shed. At every turn there were men who would stand or fall to defend or take some land or some gold or some dream. And all of them paid to have other men stand or fall with them. He had screamed at the face of death until his throat was raw and the hard lump of pain in his chest had melted away in sweat.

And he had travelled under heavy skies and bright sun, and sat in fields and in taverns and known for sure that there was nothing in one place or in another that he wanted or needed.

Except what was here.

He laughed suddenly and an uncertain smile touched Marella's lips. He lifted the front of his tunic to show blue staining over the skin of his ribs. “My mother said I needed to remember where I came from. You can’t stay still too long near her, or she’ll paint you blue and start digging sharp things into your skin.”

Marella tore her eyes from the hard muscle of his stomach and side and wet her dry lips with a sip of her drink. When she set it back on the table she sat on her hands, keeping them still and hiding their tremble. With his hair short, he looked much more like his brother. And the time away had creased his forehead, so he looked like he had worried more. And laughed less. His life had not been easy.

But the time he’d spent remembering where he came from had marked her as clearly as it had marked him. He came from a place where women were strong and capable; where no one begged or grovelled. Those women drew a sword and took what they wanted from the world. She had neither begged nor taken what she needed by force, and she had seen the thing she wanted most in the world leave her to face all of her fears alone.

“Why did you come here tonight?” she asked bluntly.

The last year had left her with too many important decisions to allow herself to dither over uncertainties. Life had forced her to decide quickly what mattered and what didn’t. She had lived with her choices and survived, but life had not been easy for her, either.

She needed to be sure. There was no room in her new world for more heartbreak. She wouldn't rush; she needed to know what was on his mind and in his heart. She could take her time, she assured herself, and be certain. Certain.

If the question made him nervous, there was no sign of it when he spoke. His voice, as always, soothed her with its calm assurance. His eyes were dark and they met hers steadily. “Because I love you,” he said. “I couldn’t stay in Britannia because it was too far away from everything important to me. All the things I'll ever need are right here, right under this roof.”

The bunch of soft flannel in her hands had already lifted her hemline almost to her knees, so Marella had no difficulty raising her skirts enough to step over his knees to sit

against him. With her arms wrapped tight around his neck she drew his mouth to hers and let her lips search his.

In an instant her body recalled every part of him. The taste and the smell and the feel of him in her arms filled her memories like a sail that carried her harder against him. She locked her fingers in his hair and felt his body respond to her desire.

His hands slid up her thighs, lifting the nightdress on his forearms as his touch climbed her back. Strong, gentle hands. His fingers raised heat in the skin of her shoulders and down her sides so she squirmed and moaned against his mouth.

When his palm slid up to cup the weight of her full breast, her breath caught and she pulled her mouth back from his. With her words stuttering on her breath, she asked, “What if I hated you and told you to go away again?”

“Do you?” His gaze was dark with longing, but there was sincerity in the question and she answered truthfully.

“I’ve had moments. When things were really hard and I didn’t know what to do. When I was trying to live up to your standards, but you weren’t here to help me or hold me.”

He untangled his hands and held her face tenderly. He smiled but his eyes made solemn promises. “Then I would have fallen on the floor at your feet and begged you to change your mind.”

“I’m not going to ask you to go,” she breathed against his cheek. “I don’t ever want you to leave me again.” Leaning onto his shoulders, she slipped back to stand and caught his hand. “Come here.”

Snuffled whimpers rose quickly into a pre-dawn chorus and Marella dropped his hand and looked briefly defeated. She huffed a sigh of resignation and pointed to the bed as she reached to peck him on the cheek. “Wait there. I won’t be long.”

Marc sat.

Cold hung on the air around him until he realized he’d been holding his breath. Barely constrained bubbles of laughter kicked in his chest and hot tears of relief and joy rose behind closed eyelids. He'd come home, as surely as the sun and moon, as certain as the stars. At long last, he was home.

In the soft light, he pressed fingers hard against his eyes, rubbed a dull ache from his temples and shrugged away some of the tension in his back and shoulders. He listened for the sounds of Marella tending to the babies. If he had his choice, he would have followed and watched her. Instead he stretched back, rested his head on her pillows and crossed his ankles.

When he opened his eyes, Marella smiled and crawled the length of the bed to rest her head on his arm. Her sigh sounded like exhaustion. He pushed the hair back from her face and wrapped his arms around her until she fell asleep. Calm filled his chest with every breath of her perfume.

Marella woke to bright daylight, with her stomach growling in response to the smells on the air.

A hand’s breadth from her ear, a voice bellowed, “She’s awake, Dad.” Nico ran from the room as she rubbed at her eyes and struggled to sit. It was warm and the room was as bright as midday.

“How long have I slept?” she asked as she slapped her way to the table.

“Sit,” he answered. “It’s midday. A bit after.”

On the table before her were eggs and cheese with bread, honey and warmed wine. Piling a spoonful into her mouth, she asked, “Why aren’t the babies screaming to be fed?”

"I gave them porridge. If they hear you, they'll start, so eat. The boys are somewhere outside."

"You gave them porridge? And they ate it?"

"Reluctantly. You can feed them after you've eaten."

Marella ate, with every mouthful tasting like ambrosia. And when the babies were fed, she slept again.

The house felt safe. Her world felt safer than it had for many months.

When night settled and the house was finally quiet, Marella sat by the fireplace combing the knots from her hair as it dried. The warm air was scented; Marc had taken the boys to Luc's villa to collect flowers from the gardens. The bunches that sat on her table had filled their small arms, and she felt guilty even as she smiled. It would be a miracle if a single bloom had been left for the owners of the garden.

From her side window, she could look up the hill at the high stone wall and the villa beyond. It was an enormous complex, spreading as far as she could see, covering the crest of the hill with its terraces and outbuildings all limed and ghostly in the moonlight. It was a palace fit for kings. And queens.

Time had not dimmed her awareness of what life would be like on the other side of that wall. In her old life, she had never once wondered about the people who lived in the villages around her family's estates. Or about the people who lived in the cities, in the houses and the market precincts. Now they were her neighbours. She was them.

She stood at the open shutters and stared up at the ghost of the life she'd left behind. When Marc slipped his hands around her waist, she jumped and laughed at the way she startled.

"Do you want to go up there?" he whispered against her ear.

"Are you joking? Yes. When can I move?" She turned in his arms and smiled up at him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"What's up on that hill that you don't have here?" When he straightened, he lifted her feet from the ground and walked toward the bedroom.

"Do you want a list? Rugs on the floor."

"I'll cover the floor with petals for you." He grinned.

"Yes, stolen from somebody else's garden." Stretching back onto the bed, she giggled as the rough stubble of his chin touched the skin of her underarm and his lips traced soft kisses over the tender flesh. "Servants."

"I'll serve you, m'lady. And I'll kiss your fingers and your toes." He did and she giggled again. "Have you ever been up there?"

"No," she answered, as if the question was incredible. "When I first got here Luc told me to ask if there was anything I needed, but no one in his position really expects the peasants to come to the door."

"He never says anything he doesn't mean." His kisses followed slowly from her ankle to her calf and along the sensitive skin of her thigh. "I'll take you up there tomorrow, peasant."

She sat up, catching his face in her hands. "Don't make fun of me. I haven't done too badly for myself, you know."

"I'm not making fun of you." His kisses still touched her lips with fire and rushed her heartbeat higher. Folding her arms around him again, she stretched back as he straightened and lay with her thighs around his waist.

Once again, memories triggered surges of pleasure. Her heart was overfull, rushing to beat out its joy, and being near him sent excitement trembling through her. If he'd tied his hands behind his back and lay as still as stone, her blood would still have pounded in her temples and heat still blushed up under her cheeks.

But he wasn't still. His fingertips grazed the skin of her thigh and pushed her *tunica* up over her belly so all her pulses throbbed. His mouth moved heat down along her shoulder. Her nails dragged into the fabric of his tunic as she gathered it higher on his back.

When he raised his arms to let her slip his shirt free, he dodged her lips that panted after his kiss, and smiled down teasingly. "You should have rugs on the floor, and servants and fine food and rich clothes," he said, wiping hair back from her forehead.

"Yes I should. But I don't want to hear about that now." Wriggling impatiently, she gripped the bottom of her own *tunica* and lifted her shoulders so she could drag it up under herself. Her driving need was wild and urgent. She had no desire for long and skilful lovemaking. All of her ached to feel him deep inside her, and to hold him there, as if they were sharing one skin.

"When do you want to hear about it then?"

"Hear about what?" she frowned as she pulled her garment free and tossed it to the side. "Marc, this really isn't a good time to talk about anything. Unless you want to tell me how much you love me, or that you're never going to disappear again. Ever. And you can do that quickly, in this ear." She touched her ear and he smiled again as she reached to pull his lips down to her own.

"I got my old job back today. It pays to have a brother who owns everything."

"Did you?" She sighed dramatically and laced her hands behind her head to listen dutifully. "What is your old job?"

"Across the river there's a second estate. I used to manage it. I'll be doing that again in a little while."

Implications started to gel and Marella let her hands drag free from under her head as all expression slipped from her face. She stared through the dim lamplight at him, watching him delight in her shock.

"You'll have to come up tomorrow and meet Luc's wife. She's going to go over to the other villa with you to work out how you can change it all."

"Why?" It was the only sound she could make.

"Because the house is just as I left it and I don't want to go back into it like that. You can redecorate it. There's staff still living there, but you can work out all those details." He laughed and she shrieked with delight, tightening her thighs and crossing her ankles behind him. A different sort of excitement tingled in her fingers and toes, making her giggle like a child.

"Now do you want to talk about it?" he smiled.

"No," she said, still half laughing. "Come here. I don't want to talk at all. I want to celebrate." Lifting her face up to his, she kissed him deeply and let her nails trace lines down the hard muscle of his back. "I want you. Here. Now." Her breath caught as his mouth moved over her cheek and down her throat. "I need you," she panted, arching to meet him as he slid his attention down over her chest. Low moans stole her thoughts and she let the words hang as she luxuriated in his touch. With her hands woven into his hair, she raised her face to his and said, "I love you, and you're here, and that's all that matters tonight. We have some really, really fine wine and I want to drink it all."

-END-

About the author:

Letitia Coyne is alive and well and living in Australia. She writes, paints, draws, sews, plays with old wooden furniture, revives jewellery and sings very loudly. She also feeds animals and adolescents. And sleeps.

Discover other titles by Letitia Coyne at Obooko.com:

Britannia – Book One.

Maia and her step-brother Cilo were raised in an opulent but isolated villa in the Seine Valley. At fifteen Cilo escaped to the army in Britannia, leaving Maia alone and afraid.

Lucius, Luc, is commander of an auxiliary cavalry unit of *Legio XX, Valeria Victrix*. The son of a Caledonian mercenary who joined Rome, he and his four brothers are soldiers of renowned ability and bravery. At twenty-five he has served ten years, has another fifteen to serve, and has had enough of killing. Exhausted and battle fatigued after the brutal AD77 Cambrian campaign, he has been weighing up his chances of survival as a deserter.

As a matter of convenience, Maia is married off to her stepbrother, and once again abandoned when he returns to his post. Seizing her one chance to escape, she joins an exclusive group of travelling prostitutes on their way to Britannia. With them, she finds herself moving through a complex web of lies and deceptions, where everyone knows more than they will say and everyone she meets has their own agenda.

If she can trust Lucius, he will take her to her husband. But everything she knows about the world will change -- if she can survive the journey.

Caledonia – Book Three.

By AD83 the Romans in Caledonia held a line of glen-blocking forts, (now known as the Gask Ridge forts, from Glasgow to Perth) and the three active legions, XXth, IXth and IInd, were split along this defensive line.

Calgacus was one of a number of first century Pictish barons -- part of a landed class in northern Celt society with access to slaves, money, men and arms. He fixed on the plan to unify the Caledonian Celtic tribes against Rome, beginning with the tribes of the Forth-Clyde area. After a crushing defeat at a fort along the Roman line, Calgacus tried to bring together all the Pictish tribes and rallied an army of perhaps sixty thousand men (and women) for the Battle of Mons Graupius.

Once Calgacus' lover, Eirbrin has been sent north to her family lands on the Gleann Mor above Inbhir Nis. Fanatical dedication to the fight to free Caledonia from Rome has been her only way to deal with the deep and disabling shames of her past. When she meets Antony she believes she has found a mystic, a man of power who can help her to overcome the demons of guilt and shame.

He is a spy, a *Natione* -- native Britons conscripted to the Roman auxiliary army -- used extensively by Agricola in the Caledonian wars where the Celt's guerrilla tactics and harsh terrain made Roman success near to impossible. Everything about him should warn Brin of his deception, but her longing to atone, her need to be free of shame, and her growing desire for him allow her to deny or justify any doubts that come.

To him, she should be no more than an enemy, and with her ties to the leader of the Picts, a formidable source of information. But as they move through the Caledonian

midlands toward the gathering battle, her beauty and courage, her innocence and the unfaltering faith she places in him draw him into an impossible situation.

Trapped between an irresistible love and an immovable duty, he must find a way to untangle his web of lies, or return to a life of service, to live or die alone.

Petra – Book Four

Petra, Arabia Provincia, 120AD

Aya grew as a filthy scavenger, trailing the Bedouin caravans that crossed the Nafud wastes and the Rub' al Khali. Bought from the arena as a young man, his new life as Sethos, the adopted son of a wealthy Roman merchant, is stained by the stigma of his past.

Jaida and her sisters were raised in luxurious slavery, destined to be the virgin oracles of Isis at provincial temples throughout the Roman Empire. When the fall of a dice brings the girls' future into question, it is Seth who must define freedom and slavery, life or liberty – for himself and for them.

He has money, strength and cunning. She has no more than her faith.

Touchstone.

"You are the fool, boy. How long have you believed your war would end and you would bring that midden home to me? How long? Really, I want you to tell me. Because I want you to think carefully about how long it is you've loved her while she never loved you back."

From the author of Britannia and Petra comes a brand new historical tragedy…

War is hell. Then it starts to hurt.

When war is all you've ever known, the promise of peace is more terrifying than any battle.

For Freya, there is no life worth remembering before the army, and none worth imagining after. Born to the lowest caste of a brutally bigoted society, she's found no more horror on the battlefield than she knew on the streets.

And she's earned a lot more respect with a sword in her hand.

As a young man, Dragan was blooded on the rush of adrenaline and sated by the euphoria of victory. With Freya beside him as his partner, he was indestructible. But age and mortality are gaining ground, and cracks have started to appear.

He's had fifteen years of war and he's earned his retirement.

Together they survived the war. But can they survive peace when it means different things to each of them?

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